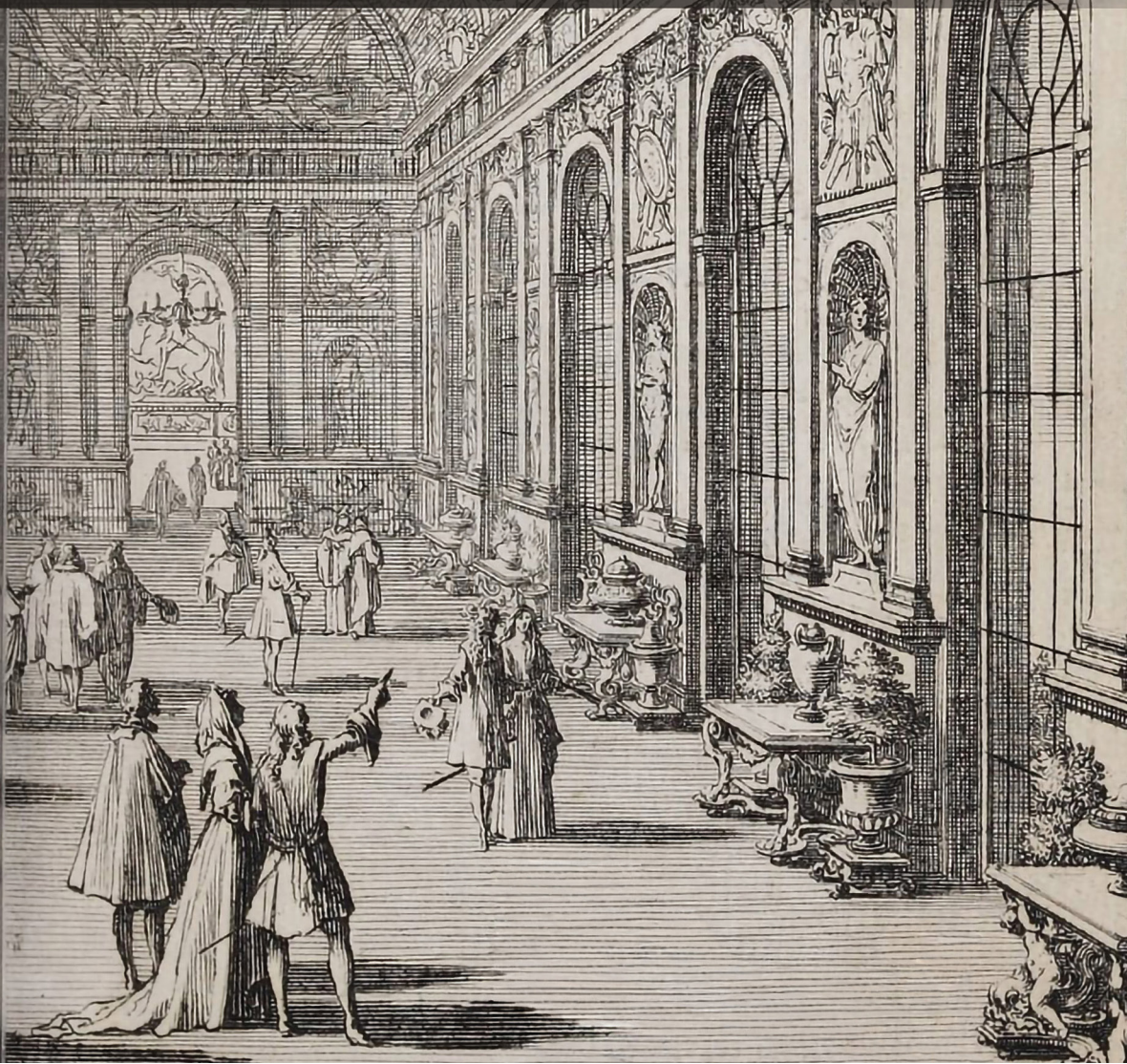


SCIENCE IN THE SALON

ATOMS AND ANIMALS IN MADELEINE DE SCUDÉRY'S *CONVERSATIONS* (1680–92)

AN ESSAY AND TRANSLATION

HELENA TAYLOR



SCIENCE IN THE SALON



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An Essay and Translation

Helena Taylor



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I. ESSAY

Introduction:

Atoms and Animals in Madeleine de Scudéry's *Conversations* and Other Works

At the end of September 1672, Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701), a prominent intellectual in seventeenth-century Paris, received a special gift: two chameleons, one male, one female, from the French consul to Alexandria in Egypt. By the time they arrived in Paris, they had had quite the journey: as Scudéry relates, they spent forty-five days at sea, travelling between the ports of Alexandria and Marseilles, housed in a little box with air holes; they then spent six weeks in Marseilles before travelling by carriage to Paris, in boxes cushioned with straw to ease the bumpy ride. The evident care taken by all involved in their journey speaks of their status as rare commodity and exotic gift. Scudéry's description also reveals the empathy that shapes the account of her observations of these creatures that she published in her *New Moral Conversations* [*Nouvelles conversations de morale*] (1688).¹ These observations, entitled 'The Story of Two Chameleons' ['*Histoire de deux caméléons*'], form one of several works from across her five different volumes of *Conversations* or moral dialogues, published between 1680 and 1692, that engage with what we might call 'science' today: that is, what in the seventeenth century included the related disciplines of natural history

1 Madeleine de Scudéry, 'Histoire de deux caméléons', in *Nouvelles conversations de morale*, 2 vols (Vve de Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688), II, pp. 496–542. The modern edition is Madeleine de Scudéry, *Histoire de deux caméléons, suivi de Description anatomique de Claude Perrault*, ed. by Aude Volpillac, with contributions by Anthony Herrel and Thierry Hoquet (Marchaisse, 2022).

(detailed descriptions of terrestrial nature) and natural philosophy (enquiry into the principles and causes of natural phenomena, including physics, astronomy, chemistry and biology).² While 'The Story of Two Chameleons' is probably the best-known text from her *Conversations* and certainly her best-known 'science' writing, it is not the only example of her engagement with natural history and natural philosophy: 'On Uncertainty' ['De l'Incertitude'] included in her 1686 *Moral Conversations* [*Conversations morales*] contains an extended discussion of atomism;³ 'On Butterflies' and the interpolated 'Observations on Butterflies' ['Des Papillons' and 'Observations sur les papillons'], from her *Moral Dialogues* [*Entretiens de morale*] (1692), constitute another series of animal observations, influenced by natural history.⁴ Analysing this corpus is essential to better understand Scudéry's 'Chameleons' text and to approach her interdisciplinary epistemologies. This corpus also offers a new angle on the significant scientific debates and advances of her period, one of considerable change and development.

The atoms and the animals, far from merely denoting what might seem to be her brief and eclectic forays into natural philosophy and natural history, are linked by Scudéry: she invites us to read them together through two common points of reference. The first is the pre-Socratic philosopher, Democritus, who is fictionalised in 'The Story of Prince Ariamene' ['Histoire du Prince Ariamene'], which immediately precedes 'On Butterflies'.⁵ Democritus, for Scudéry, is at once an atomist philosopher, whose influence is also felt in her essay 'On Uncertainty', and the author of a treatise on butterflies, which she claims to be the 'Observations on Butterflies'. The second common point of reference is uncertainty: central to her essay of the same name, it becomes the

2 For an overview, see Ann Blair, 'Natural Philosophy', in *The Cambridge History of Science: vol. 3, Early Modern Science*, ed. by Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 365–406; Paula Findlen, 'Natural History', in *ibid.*, pp. 435–68.

3 'De l'Incertitude', *Conversations morales* (Guillain, 1686), pp. 365–496. This collection has an apparently unsanctioned additional title, 'La Morale du monde', which is also used in the Amsterdam edition of this work, which also contains 'De l'Incertitude', *La morale du monde ou Conversations*, 2 vols (Amsterdam: Mortier, 1686), I, pp. 149–212.

4 'Des Papillons', including 'Observations sur des Papillons', *Entretiens de morale*, 2 vols (Anisson, 1692), II, pp. 296–334.

5 'Histoire du Prince Ariamene', in *ibid.*, pp. 96–295.

touchstone for Scudéry's exploration of the role and limits of knowledge, embodied in the figure of the philosopher — an exploration attuned to both contemporary practices and principles of natural science as well as to the ancient and Renaissance traditions of natural history, natural philosophy, and their literary reception. Taken together, these essays offer her most extended reflection on natural philosophy and natural history.⁶

With this present study, I hope firstly to shine more light her *Conversations*, a relatively understudied but important part of her oeuvre; secondly, I hope to model a way of reading them that pulls on and follows their intertextual and self-referential threads.⁷ Thirdly, I want to examine Scudéry's engagements with natural history and natural philosophy. While some critics — to date so concentrated on her novels — have recently turned to her *Conversations* and started to focus on her contribution as a political and moral thinker, or even possibly a philosopher,⁸ and some attention has been paid to her 'Chameleons'

6 They are not the only works from the *Conversations* to engage with natural philosophy: we might also think of 'Contre ceux qui parlent peu respectueusement de la religion', which discusses the nature of libertinage; or the story 'Les bains des Thermopiles, à la princesse de Milet', featuring Aspasia, Socrates, Xenophon and Euripides (both from *Conversations sur divers sujets* [*Conversations on Different Subjects*] (Barbin, 1680), 2 vols, I, pp. 173–99; II, pp. 615–837); or the 'Histoire de Belinde' in the 'Histoire et conversation d'amitié', which briefly discusses the 'atomes d'Epicure' and Descartes's vortex (pp. 988–89), from *Moral Conversations* (1686), 2 vols, II, pp. 874–999; the 'Histoire de la morale', which discusses a brief version of Democritus's life and some of Epicurus's theories; and 'Histoire de la coquetterie' which also features Aspasia (both from *New Moral Conversations*, 1688), 2 vols, I, pp. 33–246; II, pp. 755–844; or indeed 'Des Fleurs et des fruits' or 'Des Desirs' from *Moral Dialogues* (1692), I, pp. 265–336, pp. 337–90, which touches on Descartes's vortices again. The chains of connection are potentially expansive: see also the rich discussion of 'De la connaissance d'autrui et de soy-mesme' (from *Conversations on Different Subjects*), I, pp. 83–172. Animals also feature in her novels: see Nicole Aronson, 'Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?: Mlle de Scudéry et les animaux', in *Les Trois Scudéry*, ed. by Alain Niderst (Klincksieck, 1993), pp. 523–32.

7 On other ways into these *Conversations*, see Laura Burch, 'Le Livre aux lèvres. Apprendre à parler autrement dans les *Conversations* de Madeleine de Scudéry', in 'À qui lira': *Littérature, livre et librairie en France au XVIIe siècle*, ed. by Edwige Keller-Rahbé, Mathilde Bombart, Sylvain Cornic and Michèle Rosellini (Narr Verlag, 2020), pp. 511–18.

8 John C. Conley, 'Madeleine de Scudéry: Moral Philosophy in a Gendered Key', in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Lisa Shapiro and Karen Detlefsen (Routledge, 2023), pp. 422–34; Julie Candler Hayes, *Women Moralists in Early Modern France* (Oxford University Press, 2024), especially

text, particularly from the perspective of animal studies,⁹ the scope of her interdisciplinary 'scientific' writing has been little studied. The introduction will set out the context before analysing each conversation in detail in the chronological order of their publication. The second part of this volume includes a translation of all four of these conversations, 'On Uncertainty', 'The Story of Two Chameleons', 'The Story of Prince Ariamene', and 'On Butterflies', including the 'Observations on Butterflies'.¹⁰ It also branches out to include some of the other animal writings associated with Scudéry and her circle, shared in manuscript form. These date from earlier in her career and are included here after her 'Chameleons' text to underscore the intertextuality. Featuring pigeons, warblers, chameleons and turtledoves, these manuscript works anchor, as I show, both her Chameleons and her Butterflies in their literary traditions and invite us to think about the interplay between the sociable exchange of the fictional dialogue, the historical exchange represented by these manuscript poems, and practises of philosophy.

By showing how these conversations might be read together, by exploring their connections to the wider manuscript material, and by locating them at the interface between a literary tradition and a history of science one, I investigate how Scudéry's own interdisciplinary writing redraws the figure of the philosopher, and probes both the nature of enquiry and the capacities and limits of expression. In so

pp. 34–41, pp. 77–83; 196–200; and John C. Conley, 'Madeleine de Scudéry', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/madeleine-scudery>.

- 9 Anne E. Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime, or of Chameleons', *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 7.1 (2016), pp. 27–41; Peter Sahlins, 'Resisting Descartes: Three Chameleons between Science and Literature', in *1668: The Year of the Animal in France* (Zone Books, 2017), pp. 277–310. See also Nicole Aronson, 'Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?'; Nathalie Grande, 'Une vedette des salons: le caméléon', in *L'animal au XVII^e siècle*, ed. by Charles Mazouer (Narr Verlag, 2003), pp. 89–102.
- 10 The modern English translations of Scudéry's other works are: *The Story of Sapho*, ed. and trans. by Karen Newman (Chicago University Press, 2003); Madeleine de Scudéry, *Selected Letters, Orations and Rhetorical Dialogues*, ed. and trans. by Jane Donawerth and Julie Strongson (Chicago University Press, 2004); Madeleine de Scudéry, *Lucrece and Brutus: Glory in the Land of Tender*, English ed. and trans. by Sharon Diane Nell (Iter Press, 2021). There was one seventeenth-century English century translation of her first volume of conversations, a volume not analysed here, *Conversations sur divers sujets* (Barbin, 1680), 2 vols: *Conversations upon Several Subjects in Two Tomes*, trans. by Ferrand Spence (London: Rhodes, 1683).

doing, I examine how her work prompts reflection on the gendering of the philosophical canon and challenges generic categories as defined by the separation of the 'two cultures' of arts and sciences, thus prompting a genealogical reflection on the parallel discourses of environmental humanities and history of science.

Madeleine de Scudéry: *Conversations*

Madeleine de Scudéry was an important figure in seventeenth-century European intellectual culture. Born in 1607 in Le Havre where her father was the port governor, her life spanned the entire century. It is thought that she was orphaned as a child and that she and her brother, Georges, were brought up in Rouen by their uncle, a clergyman with an extensive multi-lingual library, which he allowed the siblings to explore.¹¹ Madeleine joined her brother in Paris in the late 1630s and he, a burgeoning poet and playwright, introduced her to influential Parisians, notably Catherine de Vivonne, the marquise de Rambouillet, who welcomed them to her salon, the *chambre bleue*, where Scudéry would have met Valentin Conrart, Jean Chapelain, and Vincent Voiture, to name but a few of the prominent intellectuals who are mentioned in the works in this volume. Madeleine and Georges collaborated creatively (although the works were published under his name): it is thought they co-wrote two long romances, *Ibrahim ou l'illustre Bassa* [*Ibrahim or the Illustrious Bassa*] (1641), and the ten-part *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* [*Artamenes or Cyrus the Great*] (1648–53), and *Les Femmes illustres* [*The Illustrious Women*] (1642), a series of speeches by mythological and historical women. From 1657 she received a royal pension and many of her works acknowledge this favour (for instance, her *Conversations* are dedicated to the King). After some time spent in Marseilles, the Scudérys were installed from 1651 in a new residence in the Marais. 1648–53 was marked by a revolt against the crown, known as the Fronde, which in its second phase was spearheaded by the nobility resistant towards the progression to absolutism: both the Scudérys were connected to significant frondeurs (indeed Georges went into exile), although

11 See Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry ou le voyage au pays de Tendre* (Fayard, 1986); for a detailed description of Madeleine's and Georges's life in Paris, see also Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, pp. 5–24.

Scudéry's stance was reconciliatory.¹² Scudéry remained in Paris and hosted her own salon from 1653, 'the samedis', for which she is well known, and wrote *Clélie* (1654–1661), a novel about the history of Rome from its founding to the early Republic, before turning to shorter fictional genres with *Célinde* (1661), *Mathilde of Aguilar* (1667), and *La Promenade de Versailles* [*A Versailles Promenade, dedicated to the King*] (1669).¹³ From the 1680s, she effected another shift in genre with five volumes of what we might call her version of the philosophical dialogue, which are the subject of this present study: *Conversations on Different Subjects* (1680), *New Conversations on Different Subjects* (1684), *Moral Conversations* (1686), *New Moral Conversations* (1688), and *Moral Dialogues* (1692). These works, published anonymously, or as by 'M. D. S. R', although her authorship was an open secret, contain conversations among fictional friends on a theme, often placed alongside short, interpolated fictions; while some of these conversations were re-workings of earlier set-pieces from her novels, most were new.¹⁴

Her long-form novels from the mid-century, her shorter *nouvelles* from the 1660s, and her *Conversations* were not only relatively new in terms of genre but they were also sites where she formulated an ethics of behaviour and sociability that placed women at the heart of intellectual and social interaction.¹⁵ Scudéry articulated an ideal model for the female intellectual: she defended women's education in certain subjects, but also emphasised the need for them to be modest and avoid seeming scholarly or pedantic 'femmes savantes'.¹⁶ Her own exclusion

12 On the Scudérys and the Fronde, see Aronson, p. 165. See also Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, 'The Fronde and Madeleine de Scudéry', in *Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700*, ed. by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 190–98.

13 On her life, see also Alain Niderst, *Madeleine de Scudéry, Paul Pellisson et leur monde* (Nizet, 1671).

14 See the selection and discussion in Delphine Denis, '*De l'air galant*' et autres conversations: pour une étude de l'archive galante (Champion, 1998); see also Denis, *La Muse galante: poétique de conversation dans l'œuvre de Madeleine de Scudéry* (Champion, 1997). See also the critical edition of selected *Conversations*: Phillip J. Wolfe, *Choix de Conversations de Mlle de Scudéry* (Longo Editore, 1977), which includes 'De l'Incertitude'.

15 On the relationship between the art of conversation and conduct books by, for instance, Antoine Gombaud, Nicholas Faret, and Antoine de Courtin, see Elizabeth Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

16 On women and learning, see Myriam Dufour-Maître, *Les Précieuses: Naissance des*

from official forums of learning is at once self-evident and only partial: as a woman she was not a member of any of the French *Académies*, although she did win a prize from the *Académie française* in 1671 for an anonymously submitted ‘Discourse on Glory’, and from 1684, she became a member of the Italian *Accademia dei Ricovrati* in Padua. She was subject to misogynist mockery and her access to certain forms of education, such as in classical languages, was limited.¹⁷ However, this was mitigated by her wide-ranging education, and her social capital and networks. She responded to these challenges by cultivating an exclusionary influence.¹⁸

The exquisite social grace of Scudéry’s learned persona meant that the genre and art of conversation were of great interest to her, as is evident from the conversations devoted to these subjects, such as ‘On Conversation’ (1680); ‘On Speaking Too Much or Too Little’ (1680); ‘How to Speak Well’ (1680), ‘On Wit’ (1680), and even ‘On the Manner of Writing Letters’ (1684). The conversations concerned with the art of speaking and with ‘politeness’ have received the most critical attention (including translation and editions).¹⁹ Like her earlier *Femmes illustres*,

femmes de lettres en France au XVIIe Siècle (Champion, 1999); Linda Timmermans, *L’Accès des femmes à la culture (1598-1715)* (Champion, 1993); Anne E. Duggan, *Salonnières, Fairies, and Furies: The Politics of Gender and Cultural Change in Absolutist France* (rev. ed.) (University of Delaware Press, 2021). On the figure of the ‘femme savante’, see Helena Taylor, *Women Writing Antiquity: Gender and Learning in Early Modern France* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

- 17 It is unlikely that she learnt Latin, although some sources for her work were only available in Latin; but it is possible that she shared a tutor with her brother: see Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, p. 9; Strongson and Donawerth, *Selected Letters*, p. 3.
- 18 On her exclusionary influence, see for instance, Annalisa Nicholson, ‘The Satire of the Salonnière: Women and Humour in Seventeenth-Century France’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 59 (2022), pp. 361–75.
- 19 See All Lauren Samantha Forbes, ‘Madeleine de Scudéry on Conversation and its Feminist Ends’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 30.1 (2022), pp. 48–70; Donawerth, *Conversational Rhetoric*; Donawerth and Strongson; Denis, ‘De l’air galant’. For a discussion of the conversations on the art of conversation, see Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 107–12; and on politeness, see Anthony J. La Vopa, *The Labor of the Mind: Intellect and Gender in Enlightenment Cultures* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 19–43. For broader approaches to her *Conversations*, see Barbara Piqué, ‘Les cadres allégoriques dans les conversations de Madeleine de Scudéry’, in *Madeleine de Scudéry: une femme de lettres au xvii^e siècle*, ed. by Delphine Denis and Anne-Élisabeth Spica (Artois Presses Université, 2002), pp. 59–67; Chloe Hogg, ‘The King in Trinkets: Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Conversations* and the Downsizing of Absolutism’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century*

which, as Jane Donawerth and Julie Strongson show, were pitched as rhetorical models for women in what is traditionally a male-dominated art,²⁰ these conversations offered a model for discourse aimed at a well-educated elite, drawing together the ethics and aesthetics of the *galanterie* of Scudéry's time.²¹ Her use of the terms 'conversations' and 'entretiens' in her titles signify a discourse that is sociable, polite, and non-hierarchical — compared, for instance, to the more formal and institutional term 'conférence'. Scudéry's *Conversations* usually stage both male and female fictional interlocutors, favour moderate, agreeable exchange over acrimony, are necessarily multivocal, 'advocate collaboration [...] with no superior speaker',²² and use dialogue to work through ideas and concepts that might otherwise be written about in treatise form. As Allairen Forbes describes, her dialogues are a 'philosophical phenomenon and socio-political practice';²³ Julie Candler Hayes depicts their 'nuanced working through of [...] topics that goes beyond vulgarisation to offer carefully constructed explorations of moral psychology and ethics'.²⁴

In this edition, I build on this critical work but shift attention towards the interactions between her art of conversation and the epistemologies and hermeneutics of natural philosophy and natural history. In particular, I probe the function of dialectic — as an art and practice of argument — in her dialogues, showing how dialectic and the attendant

Studies, 41.3 (2018), pp. 355–71; and Laura Burch, 'A Modest Proposal: Reframing the Frontispieces of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Conversations* (1680–1692)', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 34.1 (2012), pp. 52–67.

- 20 *Selected Letters, Orations and Rhetorical Dialogues*, ed. and trans. by Donawerth and Strongson, p. 17. See also Jane Donawerth, *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women's Tradition, 1600–1900* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012); and Danielle Griffin, 'Shaping the Conversation: Madeleine de Scudéry's Use of Genre in Her Rhetorical Dialogues', *Rhetorica* 37.4 (2019), pp. 402–21. For foundational work on Scudéry and sociability, see Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations*, especially pp. 41–75. See also Chloe Hogg, 'Early Modern Women and the Philosophical Tradition', in *Teaching Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. by Faith Beasley (MLA, 2011), pp. 293–302.
- 21 On *galanterie*, see Alain Viala, *La France galante: essai sur une catégorie historique* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).
- 22 Griffin, 'Shaping the Conversation', p. 415. See also Conley, 'Madeleine de Scudéry: Moral Philosophy in a Gendered Key', in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Shapiro and Detlefsen, p. 424.
- 23 Forbes, p. 49.
- 24 Hayes, p. 35.

rhetoric of variety and probable argument offer a programmatic heuristic for the explorations of variety, the probable and the plausible that recur throughout her philosophical reflections. Building especially on Raphaële Garrod's work on dialectic and novelty, I argue that dialectic offers Scudéry what Garrod calls a 'flexible toolkit' for representing the epistemic changes of her period.²⁵ While variety of opinion is valued by Scudéry as part of the art of good conversation, and it usefully facilitates the author's suspension of judgement (or the appearance of it), it has a deeper epistemological signification in her work. There is in Scudéry's *Conversations*, I suggest, an operational link between the possibility of holding opposing views, the examination of probable, plausible arguments, and their representation in genres associated with 'plausibility' or *vraisemblance*.

I also want to think about her *Conversations* as forms of exchange and to probe the relationship between the fictional exchange they represent and the historical loci they evoke. Across these *Conversations*, Scudéry mixes fictional, historical, and contemporary figures, as she has fictional characters refer to gatherings attended by a range of people, including real contemporaries such as Jacques Rohault. Rohault, a key figure in the dissemination and legitimisation of Cartesianism in aristocratic circles, is named in 'On Uncertainty' as having disciple philosophers among the fictional friends' acquaintance.²⁶ On other occasions in the *Conversations*, members of Scudéry's real circle of acquaintance are referred to in the text with the pseudonyms that they used as part of their social role-playing games (for example, Acante as Paul Pellisson; Theodamus as Valentin Conrart; and Sapho and Palmis as Scudéry herself). Inclusion in this present volume of the manuscript material associated with Scudéry — in which we encounter some of these pseudonyms and works mentioned in the published fictional dialogues — further underscores the interplay between imagined and real spaces of exchange.

In taking this approach, I engage with the field of 'salon studies';²⁷

25 Raphaële Garrod, *Cosmographical Novelties in French Renaissance Prose (1550–1630): Dialectic and Discovery* (Brepols, 2016), p. 4.

26 See Stéphane Van Damme, 'Restaging Descartes. From the Philosophical Reception to the national Pantheon', *Les Dossiers du Grihl* (2007) <http://journals.openedition.org/dossiersgrihl/742>.

27 For recent work, see Annalisa Nicholson, *A Salon-in-Exile: Hortense Mancini and the French Diaspora in Restoration London* (Bloomsbury, 2025). A key work in this

in so doing, I acknowledge the complexity of approaching manuscript material as 'evidence' of historical practice. That question has been applied to other writing associated with Scudéry and her circle, namely the *Chroniques du samedi*, a series of letters and poems from 1653–54 by attendees of Scudéry's salon collected in the papers of Paul Pellisson. Some historians advise caution over imposing onto this text a self-contained coherence that is more the effect of the subsequent history of the manuscript than evidence of its original circulation and conception.²⁸ More broadly, any notion of 'salon culture' must be introduced with the explanation that the vision of a utopian, shared space of intellectual exchange is a nineteenth-century invention (indeed the figurative use of the term 'salon' dates back to the nineteenth century; in Scudéry's time it was called a *ruelle*), and that the salon space was not a privileged location of intellectual exchange nor did it involve equal participation between all attendees.²⁹ My focus here is less on the socio-literary dynamics and more on the way the manuscript poems model what Sharon Nell calls 'writing and communicating with wit'.³⁰ The 'salon' of my title refers both to the multivocal literary practices of Scudéry and her circle, engaged in ludic role-playing and self-referential imaginary textual play, and to the fictional spaces of exchange as represented by the *Conversations*.³¹ Without flattening their distinction,

field is Faith Beasley's *Salons, History and the Creation of Seventeenth-Century France* (Routledge, 2006).

- 28 Madeleine de Scudéry, Paul Pellisson et leurs amis, *Chroniques du Samedi. Suivies de pièces diverses (1653–1654)*, ed. by Alain Niderst, Delphine Denis and Myriam Maître (Champion, 2002). See also Geoffrey Turnovsky, 'Chroniques des Chroniques du Samedi: l'invention d'un manuscrit', *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, 11–2 (2017) <https://journals.openedition.org/dossiersgrihl/6795>.
- 29 Antoine Lilti, 'Les salons d'autrefois: xvii^e ou xviii^e siècle?', *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 28–29 (2002), <http://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/1032>; Nicolas Schapira, 'Écrivains et élites urbaines au xvii^e siècle: peut-on se passer du modèle du salon?', in *La Ville et l'esprit de société*, ed. by Katia Béguin and Olivier Dautresme (Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2004), pp. 17–32. For a persuasive reading of Scudéry's *Chroniques* as both representing an insider view of the activities of her circle and also manifesting unequal friendship and quasi-patronage relations, see Duggan, 'Adults at Play: Les Chroniques des Samedis de Mademoiselle de Scudéry', in *Salonnières, Fairies and Furies*, pp. 91–120.
- 30 Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, p. 21.
- 31 The two reinforce each other: see Hogg, 'The King in Trinkets', p. 355. See also Violetta Trofimova, 'Le rôle des lectrices dans la circulation des *Conversations de morale* de Madeleine de Scudéry', in *À qui lira? Littérature, livre et librairie en France au XVII^e siècle*, ed. by Keller-Rahbé et al., pp. 519–25.

as Elizabeth Goldsmith and Anne E. Duggan have shown, ‘conversation’ could be seen as the thread linking the physical and the virtual ‘salon’.³² Approaching both historical practices of intellectual exchange and imagined conversations as ‘lieux de savoir’ models a material and cultural approach to the history of philosophy: taking my cue from Stéphane Van Damme, I use this approach as a way into examining a wide range of philosophical actors, spaces of philosophical exchange, and the ways in which philosophy is both represented as, and becomes, a social practice.³³

Science and Philosophy in Scudéry’s Paris

The Paris Scudéry knew was a thriving centre for ‘natural sciences’: it witnessed both theoretical interventions in natural philosophy, and experimental and anatomical advances in natural history. This was an exciting time for science: new discoveries across Europe had challenged some of the received ideas from antiquity of the nature of the universe (particularly from Aristotle and Ptolemy). The findings of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and later Newton had chipped away at scholastic cosmology, while Hooke’s microscopic observations were radically reforming natural history. As scientific practice gained new reach, greater social visibility and status were afforded to scientific practitioners who had previously been on the edge of scientific establishment.³⁴ As a period of epistemic change, it has also been seen as one of anxiety about the scope of empirical knowledge: new optical instruments not only enhanced eyesight but also emphasised its weakness and fallibility — truth was paradoxically both provable and unstable.³⁵ As a result, some scholars have traced a shift in the discourses of both natural philosophy and natural history towards compiling, collecting and *admiring* and away from an inductive quest for laws and causes based on such observations

32 See Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations*, p. 2; and Duggan ‘Adults at Play’.

33 See Stéphane Van Damme, *À toutes voiles vers la vérité: une autre histoire de la philosophie au temps des Lumières* (Seuil, 2014).

34 See Findlen, ‘Natural History’ and Blair, ‘Natural Philosophy’. While this period is described as one of change, I follow recent scholarship that resists the traditional idea of a ‘scientific revolution.’

35 See Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris, *Baroque Science* (Chicago University Press, 2013), p. 8.

(and the model for observation without recourse to causation is Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*).³⁶ As we will see, attention to wonder and the limits of observation are key elements of Scudéry's philosophy.

The changes in practices and practitioners also meant greater public access to different forms of science. For instance, the royal botanical garden in Paris, the *Jardins du roi*, founded in the 1620s, was publicly accessible from 1640 and Joseph-Guichard Duverney, anatomy lecturer at the *jardin* from 1679, drew large mixed-gender crowds for his public anatomy lectures and demonstrations.³⁷ As we know from Scudéry's account of her chameleons, dissections also took place in private homes and salons in Paris. Accounts of the anatomy and physiological properties of animals were conveyed in beautiful books, richly illustrated and aimed at an elite literary public, intended also to showcase the work of the Parisian Royal Academy of Sciences, founded in 1666. Claude Perrault, a founding member of this Royal Academy, produced his *Description anatomique d'un caméléon, d'un castor, d'un dromadaire, d'un ours et d'une gazelle* [*Anatomical Description of a Chameleon, a Beaver, a Dromedary, a Bear, and a Gazelle*] (1669), a key intertext for Scudéry's work and one that, as she indicates, was 'at everyone's disposal' (p. 110). This quarto book was then developed and expanded into a far more exclusive prestige object, a luxurious elephant folio landmark edition produced by the Royal Academy: *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* [*Memoirs for a Natural History of Animals*] (1671).³⁸

36 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 187; Nicholas Jardine, James A. Secord, and Emma Spary, *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). On Pliny see Rowan C. Tomlinson, 'Plusieurs choses qu'il n'avoit veuës': Antoine Du Pinet's Translation of Pliny the Elder (1562)', *Translation and Literature*, 21.2 (2012), pp. 145–61.

37 Anita Guerrini, *The Courtiers' Anatomist: Animals and Humans in Louis XIV's Paris* (Chicago University Press, 2015), pp. 201–38 (pp. 212–25). See also Stephen Gaukroger, *The Collapse of Mechanism and the Rise of Sensibility: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1680–1760* (Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 229–56.

38 *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* (l'Imprimerie Royale, 1671) and *Description anatomique d'un caméléon, d'un castor, d'un dromadaire, d'un ours et d'une gazelle* (Léonard, 1669). An expanded version, the *Suite des Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux*, was published in 1676. For a comparison of Perrault's and Scudéry's chameleons, see Peter Sahlins, 'A Tale of Three Chameleons: The Animal between Science and Literature in the Age of Louis XIV', in *French Thinking about Animals*, ed. by Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus (Michigan State

In the preface to the *Mémoires*, Perrault establishes the principle whereby observation alone suffices to advance understanding, without recourse to a systemic causal theory; and advances an ethos of ‘certitude et vérité’ (certainty and truth), with ‘certitude’ emerging as a key term.³⁹ He claims that descriptions included in these texts aimed to represent anatomical observations of the animals objectively, moving away from focus on behaviour or habits.⁴⁰

Animals were also displayed publicly in the wider service of Louis XIV’s biopower: like monarchs across Europe, he used exotic creatures to celebrate his colonial expansion and pioneering voyages. In France, as elsewhere in Europe, colonial expansion, trade, and travel generated new discoveries fuelling these practices of collecting, which Neil Kenny describes as broader ‘cultures of curiosity’.⁴¹ In Versailles, Louis XIV instituted a menagerie of such creatures. This menagerie played a significant part in the extravagant outdoor festival, the *fête galante*, that took place over the second week of May in 1664.⁴² Descriptions of the Versailles gardens and its creatures were avidly read, including Madeleine de Scudéry’s own 1669 *Versailles Promenade*.⁴³

Animals were thus flesh and blood curiosities; yet they were also more abstract, theoretical tools for allegory and thought. Perhaps the most famous — and relevant — example of this occurs in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* (1637), in which he formulates his notion of the thinking subject and draws a distinction between humans and animals. In his system, the unique property of the immortal soul is to think and to be aware of its own thinking, whereas all bodies function in

University Press, 2015), pp. 15–30; and Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 98–106; and Madeleine de Scudéry, *Histoire de deux caméléons, suivi de Description anatomique* de Claude Perrault, ed. by Volpilhac et al. On the *Mémoires* more broadly, see Guerrini, pp. 138–41 and pp. 147–51.

39 See Guerrini, pp. 151–56; and pp. 165–200 on Perrault’s own philosophy of animals, which is beyond the scope of this current study.

40 ‘Préface’, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire naturelle des animaux*, np.

41 Kenny, *Uses of Curiosity*, p. 160.

42 See Sahlins, 1668, p. 94.

43 See also Jean de La Fontaine in his ‘Cormorant and the Fish’ in his *Fables de La Fontaine* (Thierry, 1678); Madeleine de Scudéry, *Promenade de Versailles, dédiée au roi* (Thierry, 1669). The frontispiece to the 1684 *Conversations Nouvelles sur divers sujets dédiées au roy*, used as the cover to this present volume, probably depicts the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. See Hogg, ‘Early Modern Women and the Philosophical Tradition’, p. 299.

mechanistic ways. Humans possess an immortal soul and animals do not. Proof of the latter is that animals cannot talk or respond in a limitlessly interactive way: they just respond on the bodily level, that is, on the level of the machine. He thus denies animals self-consciousness but does not deny them sensation. This perspective contrasts with much of ancient thought, whereby distinctions between animals and humans were ones of degree, not kind. For instance, for Aristotle, any animate thing capable of nutrition had a soul. He identified three different souls accounting for increasingly complex biological functions — plants have a vegetative soul, animals vegetative and sensible, and humans rational, sensible and vegetative. In contrast, Descartes locates these cognitive modes in the mind alone, as distinct from the body, and this distinction is what sets apart human beings from (non-human) animals and plants.⁴⁴ Descartes's main metaphysical focus is an examination of human cognition, and the passage on animal bodies constitutes a very small part of Descartes's overall argument: as Emma Gilby stresses in her recent study, Descartes is not really interested in animal behaviour.⁴⁵ As we will see when scrutinising Scudéry's response to the idea of a mechanised animal, it is sometimes hard to establish whether she was responding to Descartes's account proper in the *Discourse*, reprinted in 1668, not long before she received her chameleons, or to Descartes's later reception in the 1660s and 1670s, when, as Gilby stresses, the term 'animal-machine' became a sort of shorthand for a version of Cartesianism, such as that of Malebranche, which promoted a more trenchant idea of animal automatism and mechanism than Descartes himself had elaborated.⁴⁶

Scudéry is suspicious of the concept of the 'animal-machine'; a suspicion that can be set in the wider context of Parisian salons.⁴⁷ Jean de La Fontaine's 1678 verse response to Descartes, his *Discours*

44 This brief summary has benefitted from Emma Gilby, *Descartes and the Non-Human* (Cambridge University Press, 2025) and Raphaële Garrod and Alexander Marr, eds, *Descartes and the Ingenium: The Embodied Soul in Cartesianism* (Brill, 2021).

45 René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. by Frédéric de Bouzon (Folio, 2009); Gilby, *Descartes and the Non-Human*, p. 33.

46 Gilby, pp. 29–37, especially pp. 36–37. Nicholas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité* (Pralard, 1674).

47 See also Leonora C. Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie* (Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 154–79; Sahlins, 1668, pp. 277–310.

à *Madame de la Sablière*, addressed to the intellectual and salon host Marguerite de la Sablière, mocked this notion of an animal-machine, drawing instead on older traditions which celebrated animals for their ingenuity, judgement and wide-ranging capacities. Today the best-known example of that tradition is probably Montaigne's 'Apologie de Raymond Sebond' (*Essais* II.12), which underscores such capacities in order to question the human claim to superior knowledge, but La Fontaine was also engaging with recent works responding to the Cartesian animal, such as those by Ignace-Gaston Pardies, Jean-Baptiste Du Hamel and Marin Cureau de la Chambre.⁴⁸ In mocking the mechanised animal, La Fontaine also exaggerated its (in)capacities, claiming, in his verse, that Descartes's animal has 'no soul, no choice, no sentiment' and is 'unfeeling', strengthening the association between Descartes and animals as unfeeling machines.⁴⁹ In relation to Scudéry, as we will explore further below, her 'Story of Two Chameleons' has been read as combining resistance to the machine animal (a mixture, I think, of Descartes's own and the later version) with resistance to wider assumptions of women's inferior capacities of thought in a gesture that has been described as an early example of eco-feminism, an approach which aligns the subjugation of nature with other forms of (patriarchal) subjugation.⁵⁰

Just as there is a distinction to be made between Descartes's writing and its reception as regards the 'animal-machine', so too can we trace a distinction between Descartes's non-gendered thinking subject and later conceptions of Cartesianism that took a less equal approach to women. Written in French as well as the Latin typical of scientific writing in the period and vaunting a non-gendered thinking subject, Descartes's writing was not only accessible to women intellectuals, but

48 Michel de Montaigne, 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond', *Essais II*, ed. by Alexandre Micha (Flammarion, 1969), pp. 105–268. Ignace-Gaston Pardies, *Discours de la connaissance des bêtes* (Mabre-Cramoisy, 1672); Jean-Baptiste du Hamel, *De corpore animato* (Michallet, 1673); Marin Cureau de la Chambre, *Traité de la connoissance des animaux* (Langlois, 1648). See also Anne E. Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime', p. 29.

49 Jean de La Fontaine, 'Discourse for Madame de la Sablière' (1678), in *The Complete Fables of Jean de La Fontaine*, trans. by Norman Shapiro (University of Illinois Press, 2007), Book 9, pp. 257–62 (p. 258).

50 Harth, *Cartesian Women*, pp. 103–05; on eco-feminism, see Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime'.

also seemed to legitimise their participation in intellectual culture.⁵¹ For instance, Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin shows that ‘the philosophy of Descartes is perfectly neutral from the point of view of gender’;⁵² while Rebecca Wilkin has argued that Descartes in his writings ‘legitimated women’s full participation in the search for truth’, and that it was largely seventeenth-century interpreters who created a Cartesian legacy in which women played a less equal role.⁵³ While, as Pellegrin shows, François Poullain de la Barre’s three treatises on women’s equality and education from the mid-1670s are an example of ‘feminist doctrine [...] based on Cartesianism’, not all interpretations can be described as feminist.⁵⁴ Wilkin persuasively argues that this shift can be traced particularly in Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* [*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*] (1686), a reformulation of Descartes’s cosmology as the educational conversations between an authoritative male teacher and a young Marquise.⁵⁵ Although, as Juliette Cherbuliez argues, this text promotes a complex and ‘holistic view of gender and knowledge making’ and models a ‘predisciplinary view’ of literature and philosophy, women are included in so far as they represent the uneducated, the person to be taught, thereby, Wilkin suggests, moving far away from Descartes’s egalitarian project: this is ‘inclusion

51 There is considerable scholarship on early modern women’s engagement with Descartes. For the historical grouping of ‘Cartesiennes’ or Cartesian women, see Gustave Reynier, *La Femme au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Tallandier, 1929). See also Harth, *Cartesian Women*. Eileen O’Neill has nuanced Harth’s reading by suggesting that the published works by the women analysed do not necessarily contribute to Cartesianism per se in ‘Women Cartesians, “Feminine Philosophy” and Historical Exclusion’, reprinted in Eileen O’Neill and Gary Ostertag eds, *Disappearing Ink: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 48–72. See also Pellegrin who distinguishes between ‘Cartesian women’ and ‘Cartesian philosophers’, Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin, ‘Cartesianism and Feminism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, ed. by Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 565–79 (pp. 571–72).

52 Pellegrin, ‘Cartesianism and Feminism’, p. 570.

53 Rebecca Wilkin, *Women, Imagination and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* (Ashgate, 2008), pp. 183–222 (p. 188). See also Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin, ‘Equality, Neutrality, Differentialism: Descartes, Malebranche, and Poullain de la Barre’, in *Towards an Equality of the Sexes*, ed. by Derval Conroy (Routledge, 2021), pp. 22–38.

54 Pellegrin, ‘Cartesianism and Feminism’, p. 575.

55 Rebecca Wilkin, ‘Gender Equality in Community: Descartes, Poullain de la Barre, Fontenelle’, in *Towards an Equality of the Sexes in Early Modern France*, ed. by Conroy, pp. 39–59.

at the price of equality'.⁵⁶ As we will see, Scudéry recognises Descartes's appeal to men and women; she also, notably, avoids a unidirectional model of a male expert educating women with a more subtle, if not entirely equal, redistribution of authority.

Cartesianism was not the only philosophy available to Scudéry whose influence is felt in her work. She also engaged extensively with atomism, that is, a material understanding of the universe that, in essence, posits that the material world is made up of indivisible, miniscule particles — atoms — that move around randomly in a void; they collide and combine to create the material forms present in the world. While atomist theories developed across ancient cultures (especially ancient Islamic cultures), it was primarily ancient Greek atomism that was influential in Renaissance and early modern Europe. The pre-Socratic Leucippus and his pupil Democritus first asserted that all things came into being through the random collision of atoms in void in the fifth century BCE: this was then expanded around a century later by Epicurus and, significantly, explored much later in poetic form by the first-century BCE poet, Lucretius, in his *De Rerum Natura* [*On the Nature of Things*], re-discovered for early modern readers by Poggio Bracciolini in Fulda, Germany in 1417. While work by Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus has almost entirely been lost — which is why Lucretius's poem is so important — atomism as explored by these early thinkers was strongly refuted by Aristotle in his *Physics* and *On Generation and Corruption*.⁵⁷ The discovery of Lucretius's poem was significant for the influence of Epicureanism in early modern Europe:⁵⁸ seventeenth-century France saw the first translation of Lucretius into the vernacular with Michel de Marolles's French prose version of 1650, reprinted in 1659, and in

56 Juliette Cherbuliez, 'Ways of Knowing: Fontenelle and Gender', in *Teaching Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century Women Writers*, pp. 109–18 (p. 117); Wilkin, 'Gender Equality in Community', p. 41.

57 For useful historical overviews of atomism, see Cassandra Gorman, *The Atom in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Boydell and Brewer, 2021), pp. 22–33; and 'Sceptics and Free-thinkers' by Isabelle Moreau, in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, ed. by Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 110–23.

58 See, for example, Pierre Vesperini, *Lucrèce: Archéologie d'un classique européen* (Fayard, 2017); Christoph Lüthy, John E. Murdoch and William R. Newman, eds, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Corpuscular Matter Theories* (Brill, 2001); and David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison and Philip Hardie, eds, *Lucretius and the Early Modern* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

verse in 1677; and that of Jacques de Coutures of 1685.⁵⁹ Lucretius thus became a point of reference for a wider reading public: for instance, the poet Antoinette Deshoulières penned a nonsense version of the proem to the *DRN* in 1679.⁶⁰

As we will see in the discussion in 'On Uncertainty' and her depictions of Democritus, Scudéry is sceptical of atomism because it does not allow for a providential God. She does note a distinction between ancient atomism and its more modern interpretations which attempted to reconcile it with Christianity. Key to this reconciliation was Pierre Gassendi who suggested in his 1649 *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* [*Treatise on the Philosophy of Epicurus*] that atoms required a deity in order to function; their movement was not random or by chance, but rather determined by a providential, generative God.⁶¹ His work was translated into French in 1674 by François Bernier, a prominent intellectual and another member of Marguerite de la Sablière's salon. In 'On Uncertainty', Scudéry also sees Descartes as a modern, and more moderate, interpreter of atomism given his reconciliation of God as creator with a corpuscularian conception of the universe — even though historians normally understand Descartes to be opposed to atomism because he rejected the fundamental notions of atoms and void on the grounds that indivisible particles could not exist in a universe created by an infinite, omnipotent God.⁶² However, for Scudéry both ancient and modern atomism is too controversial, redolent of the heretical 'free thinking' or 'libertinage' she examines and condemns in her *Conversations*.

59 Michel de Marolles, *Le Poète Lucrèce, latin et français de la traduction de M. D. M* (Quinet, 1650), revised as Marolles, *Les six livres de Lucrèce de la nature des choses* (Luyne, 1659); and Marolles, *Les Six livres de Lucrèce de la nature des choses* (Langlois, 1677); Jacques Parrain, Baron des Coutures, Lucrèce, *De la Nature des choses, avec des remarques... traduction nouvelle* (Guillain, 1685).

60 Antoinette Deshoulières's 'Imitation de Lucrèce en galimatias fait exprès' [first published 1705], in *Madame Deshoulières: Poésies*, ed. by Sophie Tonolo (Garnier, 2010), pp. 443–45. See Philippe Chométy, 'Du clinamen au galimatias: l'Imitation de Lucrèce d'Antoinette Deshoulières', in *Traduire Lucrèce: pour une histoire de la réception française du De rerum natura (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)*, ed. by Philippe Chométy and Michèle Rosellini (Champion, 2017), pp. 257–84; and Helena Taylor, 'Salon Verse and the Philosopher-Poet', in *Women Writing Antiquity*, pp. 135–75.

61 Pierre Gassendi, *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri* (Barbier, 1647); François Bernier, *Abregé de la Philosophie de Gassendi*, 7 vols (Anisson and Posuel, 1678).

62 See 'Atom' by Richard T. W. Arthur, in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, ed. by Lawrence Nolan (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 35–38.

Approaching the *Conversations*

As the range of works mentioned thus far should make evident, this was also a period of experimentation in terms of *how* to write about science and scientific discovery. Other examples include works of philosophical fiction (what today we might call ‘science fiction’), such as Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’Autre Monde ou les États et Empires de la Lune* [*The Other World: the States and Empires of the Moon*] (1657) and, in England, Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* (1668). As Kenny shows, ‘collecting’, most obviously evident in cabinets of curiosity, could also be discursive and narrative as well as physical, as shown by the plethora of new or newly significant genres, such as periodicals, teaching books, how-to guides, all also part of the period’s ‘cultures of curiosity’.⁶³

Recent scholarship has attended to the interaction between literature and science in this period, emphasising the contiguous and imbricated nature of these discourses. Such scholarship has probed the place of fiction and hypothesis across literature and science;⁶⁴ and placed philosophical endeavour in the context of literary debates about verisimilitude, authority, and authorship.⁶⁵ In particular, this volume builds on recent work by Kevin Killeen, Sandrine Parageau, and Debapriya Sarkar, which has turned to the unknowable, to ignorance and to incertitude as productive modes for thinking about interconnections of literature and science.⁶⁶ It also responds to Raphaële Garrod’s focus on natural-historical description as an ‘epistemic genre’,⁶⁷ and her exploration of the discursive function of dialectic in the popularisation of cosmological and cosmographical novelties.⁶⁸

63 Kenny, *Uses of Curiosity*, pp. 160–308.

64 Frédérique Aït-Touati, *Contes de la lune: essai sur la fiction et la science moderne* (Gallimard, 2011); Richard Scholar and Alexis Tadié, eds, *Fiction and the Frontiers of Knowledge in Europe, 1500-1800* (Ashgate, 2010).

65 Emma Gilby, *Descartes’s Fictions: Reading Philosophy with Poetics* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

66 Kevin Killeen, *The Unknowable in Early Modern Thought: Natural Philosophy and the Poetics of the Ineffable* (Stanford University Press, 2023); Sandrine Parageau, *The Paradoxes of Ignorance in Early Modern England and France* (Stanford University Press, 2023); Debapriya Sarkar, *Possible Knowledge: The Literary Forms of Early Modern Science* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

67 Raphaële Garrod, ‘Introduction. Knowledge and Literature: The Natural-Historical Description as Epistemic Genre?’, *Natural History in Early Modern France: The Poetics of an Epistemic Genre*, ed. by Garrod and Paul J. Smith (Brill, 2018), pp. 1–17 (p. 12).

68 Garrod, *Cosmographical Novelties*.

Scudéry's generically hybrid scientific writing — blending verse and prose, fiction and observation, responding to both the ancient and Renaissance literary traditions of textual animals and natural philosophy as well as to contemporary cultures of natural history and philosophy — exemplifies precisely this experimentation and fruitful interchange of disciplines. However, her contributions to natural philosophy and natural history have tended to be overlooked, despite the hugely significant and important shift in scholarship that has occurred recently towards inclusion of women in the history of philosophy.⁶⁹ As this recent scholarship shows, including women is not simply a question of expanding the canon as it stands but of scrutinising the criteria for inclusion in that canon, that is, scrutinising the scope of philosophy.⁷⁰ And yet, both French and English Studies have often focused on philosophical fiction or philosophical poetry, implicitly seen as more serious, with 'incidental' and 'leisure' genres, such as salon poetry or historical fiction, overlooked or accommodated only (just) within moral philosophy, the sub-discipline of philosophy most often associated with women. There is the danger, therefore, of a too-narrow approach if the principle of inclusion is overt engagement with genres that have historically been understood as philosophical because of a normative paradigm. We can therefore place analysis of Scudéry's text in a wider interrogation of the historiography of the disciplines of natural philosophy and natural history.

In diverting attention to Scudéry's natural philosophy, I do not wish to suggest that natural philosophy is somehow more legitimate than moral philosophy or than 'moralist' thought, which, as Hayes shows, refers in the French context to writing concerned with 'social and psychological analysis', often in short forms (maxims, portraits, conversations).⁷¹ 'Morale' is, after all, a domain Scudéry seems to identify with, as demonstrated by the titles of her *Conversations*, and

69 For example, Ruth Hagengruber and Sarah Hutton, eds, *Women Philosophers from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2021); Sabrina Ebbersmeyer and Gianni Paganini, eds, *Women, Philosophy and Science: Italy and Early Modern Europe* (Springer, 2020); Derval Conroy, ed., 'Women Philosophers in Early Modern France', *Early Modern French Studies*, 43.1 (2021).

70 See, for instance, *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Detlefsen and Shapiro.

71 Hayes, *Women Moralists*, p. 7.

their capacity to provide moral instruction was perhaps part of her motivation for writing them (it has been suggested that her 1688 *Conversations* were composed at the request of Madame de Maintenon for the Saint-Cyr girls' school).⁷² As scholars such as Eileen O'Neill, Lisa Shapiro and most recently, Hayes, have shown, one of the reasons women were written out of the philosophical canon was that the subjects they engaged with, such as education or moral philosophy, were not considered to be legitimate forms of philosophy.⁷³ However, *not* looking at Scudéry's natural philosophy and natural history as such also, I argue, risks having the effect of restricting the scope and impact of her works; in her work theology, moral philosophy and natural philosophy are powerfully combined. Nor, in emphasising her philosophy, am I placing more value on this than on her reception as a literary writer — rather I want to show that she can speak to both disciplines, such as we define them today, and that her writing precisely troubles the boundaries of those later distinctions. Not only then does a more open approach benefit our understandings of Scudéry's writing, so that we might soon move beyond a determinist method which identifies her contribution as being primarily aesthetic because we tend to study the conversations associated with this already familiar element of her intellectual endeavour (on politeness, wit, etc.); but such an approach also opens a wider understanding of philosophy's cultures — across networks, communities and readers, and via entangled modes of biography, translation, observation and fiction.

As we will see in the next sections when we turn towards analysis of the individual essays, Scudéry herself poses the very question of what might count as philosophy and who might count as a philosopher on numerous occasions throughout her work. A salient example of

72 See Mallika Lecoer, *Conversation and Performance in Seventeenth-Century Salon Culture*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Columbia University, 2011, p. 215. The 1688 *New Moral Conversations* contains a 'Description de Saint-Cyr', pp. 252–84.

73 Eileen O'Neill, 'Early Modern Women Philosophers and the History of Philosophy', *Hypatia*, 20.3 (2005), pp. 185–97; Sarah Hutton, "'Blue-eyed Philosophers Born on Wednesdays": An Essay on Women and History of Philosophy', in *The History of Women's Ideas*, ed. by Karen Green and Ruth Hagengruber, *The Monist*, 98.1 (2015), pp. 7–20; *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Detlefsen and Shapiro; Hayes, *Women Moralists*, pp. 16–22. See also the excellent special issue of *Dix-septième siècle*, 296 (2022/23), 'Repenser la philosophie au XVIIe siècle: canons et corpus', ed. by Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin.

this is in the introduction to her 'Story of Two Chameleons'. In the opening paragraph, Scudéry cites as authoritative an alternative text on chameleons, Claude Perrault's *Anatomical Description of a Chameleon*, mentioned above, and then adds: 'I will not interfere by speaking about them as a physician or as a philosopher, since I am not capable. I will instead comment on what I have observed with much care and precision' (p. 110). Her emphasis here on not being a philosopher or a physician is surely a gesture of gendered modesty that implicitly opposes the female gender of the narrator with the male-only bastion of knowledge that is the Royal Academy of Sciences, and the related professionalisation of the field, from which she was excluded. And yet, Scudéry complicates this by then emphasising what she *can* do, which is observation, a key territory of the very figures she denies being. Throughout the account, with that observation, she adds to scientific knowledge, but also draws attention to its limits, formulating a distinct epistemology. Let us now turn to her essays in detail to examine this further.

* * * * *

'On Uncertainty': Atomism and Scepticism

Reflection on the figure of the philosopher — and the scope of philosophy — is a key theme of Scudéry's 1686 'On Uncertainty' from *Moral Conversations*; a conversation that also constitutes an important intertext for her other writing on animals and on atomism. 'On Uncertainty' stages a dialogue between characters described as 'decisive' (Amalthée, Amerinte, and their male friend, Aristene) and 'uncertain' (Timandre and his female friend Isidore) and explores the dangers of too much uncertainty. The 'decisive' seek to cure Timandre and Isidore of their uncertainty. A key and threatening example of uncertainty is doubt that extends to faith, and atomism, both ancient and modern, is discussed as an example of a doctrine which denies the existence of an intelligent and providential God in its promotion of the role of chance. Too much uncertainty leads one to the 'edge of a cliff' (an image used several times),⁷⁴ because doubting everything, the philosophy of the 'libertines',

⁷⁴ p. 78. References will hereafter be given to the translation in this present edition.

leads to atheism. The conversation begins with uncertainty as to how the group of friends should spend their time (opera, theatre or a promenade) and having decided on the latter, they do not know where to go but let their coach driver choose somewhere beautiful: chance then causes them to break down near the house of Aristene, their learned friend. Aristene becomes the spokesperson for the 'decisive', attempting to persuade Isidore and Timandre against uncertainty, most especially when it comes to faith. Both the 'uncertain' state at the outset that they do not question God or faith and yet Aristene berates them as if they do. The conversation ends amiably with the group drawing up a list of things that are certain (faith, laws of the nation, obeying God and the King) and things that are not (physics, astronomy, medicine, all sciences, personal taste).

Although ultimately the favour lies with divine agency, and libertinage, along with any uncertainty pertaining to faith, is denounced, the merits of uncertainty understood in a broader sense are still keenly felt in this conversation thanks to Isidore's subtlety and nuance. In this conversation, therefore, we see how the dialogue form allows for multiple expressions of opinion and the exploration of different theories even if one is ultimately preferred. While atomism is denounced as dangerous and atheist, and the exposition of atomistic discourse is framed hypothetically — Timandre says 'if religion could accept it, there would be quite some pleasure in imagining these little eternal, indivisible bodies' [...] (p. 87) — it is also the subject of serious discussion. What Timandre then goes on to describe — the indivisible bodies, the perpetual motion, the random movement, the hooking together, the different distribution according to weight and size and the creation of the world — demonstrates close engagement with atomist thought. Made apparently frivolous by the emphasis on 'pleasure', 'imagination' and the hypothetical frame, this speech nevertheless explores the version of atomism that eschews divine intervention. Later in the conversation, Timandre claims he only made these points to prompt Aristene's counterargument: to a certain degree here Timandre suggests his provocation was not meaningful, but rather a sort of game to generate discussion, much like a game or exercise of dialectic whereby speakers are tasked with arguing for a given thesis in a debate, regardless of their own views. However, rather than making his own

position seem merely ornamental, this comment also underscores the expository as well as procedural function of their dialectic — different views are examined and the persuasive capacity of dialectic is laid bare as two sides are weighed up in an attempt to convert Isidore. At the same time, in allowing Timandre to articulate this atomistic discourse at all, dialectic functions as a counterpoint to resolution in this text, as a discursive version of uncertainty that paradoxically, though I think intentionally on Scudéry's part, upholds the value and ubiquity of uncertainty while also determining its limitations. Dialectic here allows a 'both/and' logic to linger even as it determines an 'either/or' course.

That 'either/or' structure is followed through in Aristene's objections to Timandre's speech, when he disputes the role of chance in the creation of the universe. Aristene instead argues for a creative, providential God, dismissing both the view of the 'great libertines', who argue that the movement of atoms occurs by chance, 'without motor', and the recent 'more moderate philosophers', who describe it as occurring 'with motor' (p. 88). Once again, Scudéry is engaging at close range with the details of the contemporary debate. Aristene's next objection is to assert the wonder of the human body, and the human mind or reason, as proof that 'miserable hooked atoms' cannot be its cause (p. 88). Instead, he argues for divine creation, prefiguring an intelligent design argument, which Amerinte then repeats by citing the fine craft of a painter as an analogy for a providential creator. Knowledge of God in this text is based primarily on an argument of design and reason, as is evident in the examples given throughout 'On Uncertainty'.

Aristene also criticises Descartes's idea of the 'thinking substance'. The 'thinking substance' is Descartes's self-reflexive human subject whose cognitive operations are unified in the mind as an ontologically separate entity to the body, as discussed above.⁷⁵ For Descartes, this thinking substance depends on God for its existence. Aristene sees this 'thinking substance', which he notes is unique to the 'renewed philosophy' of atomism and is not in Epicurus, as a sort of expedience, a strategic means of avoiding an atheist doctrine, on the part of a philosopher he considers to be an atomist. Furthermore, Aristene attacks

⁷⁵ See Raphaële Garrod, 'Introduction: Descartes Re-Imagined: Ingenuity before and beyond Dualism', in *Descartes and the Ingenium: The Embodied Soul in Cartesianism*, ed. by Garrod and Marr, pp. 1–15 (p. 4).

the singularity of the thinking substance as human-only and so uses his arguments against it to question Descartes's mechanistic account of animal bodies. For Aristene, Descartes would have been better off 'affording intelligence' to animals, plants and mountains rather than having recourse to what is described as the 'bizarre expedient' of the machine animal (p. 92). This animal machine is merely a foil that, for Aristene, is intended only to support the idea of the human thinking substance, already an unconvincing manoeuvre in trying to reconcile Christianity with atomistic philosophy. Instead, for Aristene, the very notion of the body as machine, as applied to animals by Descartes, serves to undermine the power of a Christian God, since it is evident that animals possess intelligence, even if not an immortal soul. He says:

For as soon as I believe in a single eternal God, all wise and all powerful, it becomes easier to believe that he created the world as it is, because he wanted to, than to think that some chance circumstance made it in all the regularity we see around us. It is not even necessary to have recourse to the bizarre expedient of these machines to avoid so dangerous a step because as soon as I conceive of one single God, I understand that he was able in his omnipotence to give a little portion of light to animals without affording them an immortal soul. (p. 92)

Aristene then cites Montaigne and Aristotle, who did not make machines of animals (p. 95), to oppose Descartes and offers the 'industry' and 'intelligence' of the she-monkey as evidence which 'destroys the machines of this great man' (p. 91). Aristene brings his argument back to question the role of a chance circumstance ('cas fortuit') in the creation of the universe, arguing instead for divine agency: that God could distinguish between the souls possessed by animals and humans, just as he could provide fountains and waters with different medicinal and other properties. It seems here that the objection to the 'animal machine' is a response to Descartes's own account of living bodies in the *Discourse*, in that the objection is primarily to the superiority Descartes affords to the thinking substance and to Descartes's disinterest in animal intelligence in general, which for him bears no relevance in the search for truth.

For Isidore and Timandre, uncertainty does not extend to their faith. However, it is otherwise justified by two main reasons. First, we cannot trust our senses; and second, the variety of practices and beliefs across history and cultures undermines certainty. Isidore describes colour as

an illusion and mentions other examples of optical illusions: 'beautiful sights deceive us' (p. 74). In contrast, it is argued that we often know that something is true without seeing it (for instance, as the other characters describe, that an omniscient, omnipotent God exists). In this elaboration of what can and cannot be known as certain, particularly Isidore's questions, we could trace engagement with Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), as well as with his *Discourse*. Isidore returns us to the deception of our senses as a reason to excuse uncertainty; Timandre adds to this justification by citing the diversity of laws, customs and morals over time. In refuting sole reliance on the senses, Scudéry is opposing another tenet of Epicurus's empiricist thought, which proposes that all knowledge comes from the senses and that the senses (properly used) are reliable. With this discussion, Scudéry also alights on a key contemporary preoccupation of anatomists and theorists of vision, such as her friend Pierre-Daniel Huet and the wider Royal Academy of Sciences: for those who base truth on sense perception, what to make of the fact that eyesight is known to be able to deceive us? Aristene does not quite resolve Isidore's argument directly, but to support his case for an omnipotent God, he stresses: 'there are conclusions which are so inevitable that we can boldly argue that sometimes it is possible to know better what we do not see via what we see than it is to know what we see with our own eyes' (p. 90).

Scudéry not only discusses atomists, she also attends to a (sometimes related) tradition of sceptical philosophy. This philosophy is described as 'la secte douteuse' (the doubting school), and two of its figureheads are presented favourably for the way they recognised both the limits of knowledge and of doubt. The first is François de La Mothe Le Vayer, whom Amalthée has read and who is described as not being an enemy of atomism, although he did not go as far as in his thinking as atomist philosophers, nor did he always speak 'doubtfully' (p. 80). The second, evoked, though not named, is the ancient sceptic, Sextus Empiricus, 'the Pyrrhonian philosopher' (p. 80). As José Neto has shown, some of the discussions in 'On Uncertainty' echo elements of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, such as the use of the example of Demophon who sweated in the shade and shivered in the sun to justify uncertainty

by demonstrating human variety.⁷⁶ Sextus also drew up a list of rules for the sceptic to live by, perhaps echoed in the agreement that the ‘decisive’ and the ‘uncertain’ come to at the end of their conversation. Neto also suggests that the figure of Timandre is quite possibly based on Scudéry’s friend, Huet, also a reader of Sextus Empiricus.⁷⁷ Scudéry’s ‘Histoire de la morale’ [‘History of Moral Philosophy’] from her 1688 *New Moral Conversations* contains another discussion of ‘the doubting school’, and an allusion to this very conversation in ‘On Uncertainty’; in this text, Bérénice says ‘the conversation about uncertainty [...] has made me hate all those who are uncertain for my whole life and I am convinced that the first step towards atheism is always doubt and uncertainty’.⁷⁸

Scudéry seems ambiguous then: evidently unwilling to extend uncertainty to faith, a faith that is justified by reason but is also, as Conley shows, ‘exempt [...] from critical scrutiny’, she still offers (moderate) praise of figures associated with scepticism and likewise offers a sensitive and positive portrayal of uncertainty in part of this conversation: hence the tendency to align Scudéry with a ‘mitigated scepticism’ and possibly Christian scepticism, as I will explore further.⁷⁹ And yet, it also seems significant that she does not use the term ‘sceptique’ or its derivatives, a word deployed in French since at least the mid sixteenth century, preferring instead ‘incertitude’ and ‘doute’. More than this, she tends to use adjectives (as in ‘la secte douteuse’) and adverbs (as in to know something ‘douteusement’ or ‘assurément’) rather than substantives, except when applied, with humour, in her coinages of the ‘decisifs’ and the ‘incertains’. Her hesitation regarding overt association with a named,

76 See José Maria Neto, *Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630–1721) and the Sceptics of his Time* (Springer, 2022), p. 24. On Sextus Empiricus, see ‘Pyrrhonism’ by John O’Brien, in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, ed. by Moriarty and Jennings, pp. 62–66. It was not translated into French until 1725: see Richard Popkin, ‘A Curious Feature of the French Edition of Sextus Empiricus’, *Philological Quarterly*, 35 (1956), p. 350.

77 Neto, pp. 24–26. April Shelford sees Philinte of Scudéry’s *Céline* as based on Huet, in *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Boydell and Brewer, 2016), pp. 94–97.

78 ‘Histoire de la morale’, in *New Moral Conversations* (1688), I, p. 176.

79 See Conley, ‘Madeleine de Scudéry: Moral Philosophy in a Gendered Key’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, p. 424; Conley, ‘Madeleine de Scudéry’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. On Christian scepticism, see Sylvia Giocanti, ‘Histoire du fidéisme, histoire du scepticisme?’, *Revue de Synthèse*, 2–3 (1998), pp. 193–210; and Frédéric Gabriel, ‘Positions du “scepticisme chrétien”’, *Les Études philosophiques*, 2 (2008), pp. 137–40.

substantive philosophical school (either Scepticism or Pyrrhonism) and preferring terms that describe a person's moral state ('uncertain', 'doubt') is in keeping with her approach to learning: generically it removes this work from the domain of philosophy and places it in a more hybrid domain of 'belles lettres' and 'moralist' writing, showing her preference for vulgarising and hybridising her learning, for innovation and modernity.⁸⁰ The tendency towards adjectives and adverbs, rather than the categories of substantive nouns, also places the emphasis on the process and the instant, making thinking 'doubtfully' or 'certainly' a flexible dynamic rather than an unchanging ideology.

This conversation examines not only the nature and limitations of rational enquiry, with atomism as its case study, but it also gestures to communities of intellectual exchange, drawing attention to social practices of learning. This is evident from the role of conversation itself, but is also present in the frequent allusions to Isidore's female friend and the philosophical company she keeps. The friends in this conversation scrutinise the figure of the philosopher, in particular, the female philosopher, as they deliberate over whether philosophy (implicitly the domain of men) and polite conversation (the domain of women) are compatible. Conversation is explicitly contrasted with philosophy: 'the conversation became very pleasant for we were not speaking as philosophers' (p. 81). A range of women philosophers from antiquity, such as Arria, Hypatia, and Axiothea, are mentioned and it is agreed by all that a woman can learn philosophy as long as she is not 'too much a philosopher' (p. 85) and does not 'overstep[...] the decorum of her sex' (p. 85), which chimes with Scudéry's presentation elsewhere of the modest and aristocratic female intellectual.⁸¹ Isidore seeks Aristene's advice on whether she can ask her friend Catherine Descartes to speak against the views of her uncle, 'who in our century resuscitated atoms' (p. 84).⁸² Aristene says that she can because 'philosophers are like

80 See also Marco Faini, 'Introduction', in *Doubting Women in Early Modern Italy: Gender, Uncertainty, and Agency*, ed. by Marco Faini (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), pp. 11–28, where he discusses the dynamic nature of 'doubt' as different from the philosophical school of scepticism (p. 16).

81 See Taylor, *Women Writing Antiquity*, pp. 67–102.

82 A letter from Madame de Sévigné to her daughter claims that Catherine Descartes was outraged by Huet's criticisms of her uncle in his *Censura* (which as Neto shows was finished before Scudéry's *Conversations* were published, p. 24), given how he had complimented him to her in person; see Fabienne Gégou, *Lettre-traité de Pierre-Daniel*

lawyers' in that they can keep their disputes purely professional and are able to overcome their philosophising in agreeable friendship (p. 85). Even Isidore, the 'uncertain', is made exemplary: far from demonstrating extreme, libertine, coquettish or atheist behaviour (many of the things associated in this conversation with uncertainty and philosophy), she is described at the end of the conversation as an 'honnête femme', a 'respectable woman', who would never accept a word against religion or modesty (p. 107). Conversation, rather than philosophy, is 'agreeable', in the sense of meaning both non-combative (every time Isidore makes a critical intervention or contradicts another character it is 'with a smile' or similar) and moderate, palatable and not straying into what Scudéry calls libertinage.⁸³

The interaction between sociability and ways of knowing demonstrated in this distinction, and writ large by the genre of the conversation, is also present, playfully, elsewhere in the text, from the opening social uncertainty and role of chance in the friends arriving at Aristene's house, to the way atoms feature in the series of poetic madrigals read aloud by the friends. This is not didactic scientific poetry in the manner of Lucretius, but rather is social love poetry. One poem playfully makes thinking about atoms a welcome distraction for a certain Lysis from his unrequited love for a woman: atoms become the antithesis of love poetry and love making; but their study is also mocked as Lysis seems to have 'done better' when in love, rather than when engaging in atomistic meditation:

Since I gave my mind to atoms,
 I disdain greatness, crowns and kingdoms,
 All these vast objects are small in my eyes.
 I share my life with the most noble of cares
 And by breathing I create the air, the earth and the heavens;
 But if I must confess, my dear Sylvie:
 When I adored you, I did much better.
 (p. 83)

Huet sur l'origine des romans: édition du tricentenaire, 1669-1969 (Nizet, 1971), p. 22.

83 In 'Des Desirs' from *Moral Dialogues* (1692), I, p. 337–90, Scudéry also has Amintor state 'le grand danger est d'unir cette science douteuse avec le libertinage' ['the great danger is to unite this doubting science with libertinage'] (p. 380).

An atom in a later poem also becomes a metaphor for a woman's allure ('atoms spark out from the eyes') and the lover's most humble request: 'But, in a word, Iris, if I had a thousand hearts/ I would offer them all to pay for a single atom of yours' (p. 84). With this poem, Scudéry removes atoms from a system of natural philosophy, as Cassandra Gorman has shown to be typical of atomist poetry, to turn them into playful referents of love; however, the scientific 'version' of the atom is still lurking to produce some of the humour.⁸⁴ We could see the 'sparks from the eyes' as an almost burlesque version of a Lucretian simulacrum; that is, the Epicurean conception of vision as the interaction between atoms and organs of sense as objects cast off a thin atom-skim image — simulacrum or eidolon — that hits the eyes.

The diminutive atoms and the sense of scale they capture (as in 'All these vast objects are small in my eyes' — for, as Gorman also explores, atoms were used in poetry to think about scale) is also a statement of generic preference, and so an engagement with poetics, which Jessie Hock and others show to be central to Lucretian reception.⁸⁵ It maps onto the diminutive poetic form of the madrigal, and perhaps also onto the *galant* preference for minor(itised) genres, that is, those which do not have a classical antecedent. Indeed, even in relation to antiquity, Scudéry often prefers the minor genres and figures, favouring here the pre-Socratics of whom we have few surviving fragments; and elsewhere, in her fiction, showing a keen interest in the — likewise fragmentary — lyric poets, Anacreon and Sappho. While Scudéry herself favours prolixity over diminutive forms (she is known for having written one of the longest novels in Western history!), this tendency to favour archaic writers and non-canonical forms perhaps demonstrates an awareness of the novelty of her own endeavour. Turning fragmentary archaic Greek authors into subjects of widely read and prolix conversations, as we will see further below, results in granting both these fragments and the conversation a status that undoes traditional hierarchies of genre. With its focus on atomism and faith, with its interest in the figure of the philosopher, 'On

84 Gorman, pp. 16–21.

85 Jessie Hock, *The Erotics of Materialism: Lucretius and Early Modern Poetics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), p. 15, p. 16. See also *Lucretius and Modernity: Epicurean Encounters Across Time and Disciplines*, ed. by Jacques Lezra and Liza Blake (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). On France, see also Philippe Chométy, *Philosopher en langage des dieux*. *La poésie d'idées en France au siècle de Louis XIV* (Champion, 2006).

Uncertainty' proves a key intertext for Scudéry's writing on Democritus and Butterflies: it also contains detailed passages refuting the animal machine and so demonstrates a wide engagement with the reception of Descartes's thought in a way that also speaks to Scudéry's Chameleon essay, to which we will now turn.

'The Story of Two Chameleons': Observation and Affect

Scudéry's 'Story of Two Chameleons' is the second conversation in volume two of her 1688 *New Moral Conversations*. It opens with Bérénice offering to read an account by her friend, who we later discover is 'Sapho', Scudéry's pseudonym, about the two chameleons in her possession to the gathered company, Méliton, Zénobie, Amérinte, Périandre and Euphranor. After Bérénice has read this, the friends discuss it and share the poems written by Sapho's friends to console her after the death of her chameleons.

Scudéry's 'Chameleons' have recently received a burst of critical attention, including the first critical edition in French published in 2022. This text has been read as an example of explorations of biopower under Louis XIV, feminist eco-criticism, an ethics of care, and of the sort of ethology or animal behavioural studies explored by scholars such as Vinciane Despret.⁸⁶ I want to both build on and nuance that work, not only by situating Scudéry's chameleons alongside the other conversations discussed in this present volume, but also by treating the full text of the 'Story', including the framing narrative and the series of poems that close it, as a whole. In so doing, I stress the limitations of a purely moral and affective interpretation of this 'Story' and of an exclusive ecocritical reading, to emphasise both the empirical dimension of Scudéry's observations and the literary properties of her chameleons.

86 See Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime'; Sahlins, 1668; Volpillac, Herrel and Hoquet; Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002). On ecofeminism, see also Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993), pp. 19–40 and Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 1–23. For its relation to early modern French women's writing, see Sara Wellman, 'Post-Pastoral Possibilities: Nature and the Literary Imaginary in Early Modern France' (unpublished thesis, University of Minnesota, 2011), pp. 18–29, 38–51.

The friendship represented by the group of readers is mirrored by the portrait of the affective relationship between the two chameleons and between Scudéry and the male, whom she names Méléon. The relationship between the two chameleons is described in terms of friendship:

I will say at this point that during the five weeks that I had these two animals together, I noticed an extreme friendship between them and never the least bit of irritation. They were always side by side: if one moved, the other would follow; their little hands clasped together. (p. 114)

This feeling is shown to become more pronounced when the female chameleon dies; the male is described as tormented and agitated by her death and her corpse:

The male was so surprised and so afflicted by her death that he climbed with great haste and emotion to the top of the frame, from which he fell three times: I feared that her body tormented him so much that I moved the little chameleon and the rug on which she had died. (p. 115)

That sensitivity is also present in the relationship between Méléon and Scudéry. In naming him at all Scudéry in part grants this exotic creature the status of a pet, a status he had also acquired in being allowed to live in the house without a practical function.⁸⁷ 'Méléon' is described as having a close relationship with Scudéry: he is willing to climb on her, to relax on her, and he recognises her voice. His death is described in terms that also demonstrate their mutual affection:

He still heard and knew me as usual, but I could see that he was lethargic in getting up and that he was turning his eyes more slowly than usual. I caressed him; I took him in my hand; I put him on his warm rug; he did change colour but much more feebly than before when he was in good health. [...] He remained very beautiful, just as he remains now in my study; a quarter of an hour before he died, I called him by the name, 'Méléon', that I'd given him and he opened his eyes slowly, turning to me and still clearly recognising me. (pp. 118–119)

With these capacities of affection, sensitivity and recognition, Scudéry offers much to counter a mechanistic view of the animal — particularly the more exaggerated version of the Cartesian animal machine as per

87 On what constitutes a pet, see as a foundational text, Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (Penguin, 1983), pp. 112–15.

Malebranche, La Fontaine and others. With their mutual affection, Scudéry also seems to problematise a hierarchy of human/animal relations.

Those capacities are also foregrounded in the terminology Scudéry uses to describe the chameleons. They are repeatedly described as acting with judgement, and thus having intention and the capacity of thought, rather than their movements being a function the body alone: 'This animal has a slow, serious and majestic gait. He never takes a step without having thought first about where he will place his foot' (p. 111); and 'They would look around again and then they would decide to climb down, always choosing the sunny garden side' (p. 113). She makes that reference to judgement explicit: 'he sees with intelligence and judgement' (p. 112). This emphasis also recalls the enumerations of animals' capacities and intelligence that we find in both Montaigne's *Apologie*, where, for instance, he discusses dogs' abilities to lead the blind, and La Fontaine's *Discours à Madame de la Sablière*, where he cites the way partridges deceive their prey and praises beavers' work ethic and skill. In valorising their judgement and affection, Scudéry also seems to impute moral virtues to her chameleons, making them examples or models.⁸⁸ In other words, the chameleons come to stand, anthropomorphically, for desirable human characteristics, situating Scudéry's 'Story' in what Peter Sahlins describes as the 'theriophilic' tradition, which sees animals as exemplary and superior to humans.⁸⁹

Foregrounding the sensitivity and the mutual affection of chameleon and owner could be seen as a partial example of what today we would call eco-feminism in the sense described by Carol Adams:

Many contemporary feminist theories address a variety of conceptual sets that are historically characterized by these opposing terms: subject/object; self/other; domination/agency; culture/nature, sameness/difference; male/female; white/nonwhite; human/animal. We have seen how these dualisms mediate power and value hierarchies of domination: man dominates woman; culture dominates nature; whites dominate people of color whom they label 'nonwhite'; a subject dominates an object; humans dominate animals. The eradication of a logic of domination as it is sustained, perpetuated, and enacted through these cultural sets becomes one of the goals of ecofeminism.⁹⁰

88 See Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal sublime'.

89 Sahlins, 1668, pp. 28–36, pp. 277–310.

90 Carol J. Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals*

Because Scudéry draws attention to women's exclusion from institutions of knowledge in a text that also champions animal sensitivity, critics have seen here an alignment between women and non-human animals as marginalised subjects. While Erica Harth demonstrates that Scudéry embraced Cartesian thought selectively, resistance to the animal machine, Scudéry's 'dismantl[ing of] the barrier that denies an emphatic connection between thinking subject and object',⁹¹ is posited by Harth as a call by Scudéry for women to be 'recognized as thinking subjects'.⁹² Anne E. Duggan persuasively expands this to make an eco-feminist reading:

Arguably, Scudéry's representation of her two chameleons — and of animals in general — works to undo precisely the dichotomies that subject the non-human animal to the human. In the same vein that Scudéry challenged the male domination of women, freeing up women's voices and proposing women as ideal, sublime models to be valued for themselves (and not on the marriage market), so she challenges here the human domination of the non-human animal by endowing her chameleons with reason, dignity, and the possibility of cross-species *amitié* [friendship].⁹³

Duggan suggests that this emphasis on cross-species friendship anticipates the eco-feminist arguments of critics like Val Plumwood and her conception of a compassionate, sympathetic 'ethics of nature'.⁹⁴

There is much that is persuasive here and is continuous with Scudéry's other writing on animals. However, for all that Scudéry endows her chameleons with dignity and emphasises this affective relationship, they also remain objects of scientific observation: there is a tension between their status as object and as pet. The chameleons' position as commodity, even status symbol, determines Scudéry's guardianship. They are a curiosity: 'all of Paris came to see them' and 'I showed them off to many people' (p. 114) — that sociability was not always to the advantage of the chameleons: Scudéry and her friends together temporarily lose one of them and one of the visitors manages to pull off the female's leg,

(Continuum, 1994), p. 121.

91 Harth, pp. 105–06.

92 Ibid., p. 106.

93 Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime', p. 37.

94 Val Plumwood, 'Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism', *Hypatia* 6.1 (1991), 3–27 (p. 8); Duggan, p. 33.

hastening her death. As objects of curiosity, they are more akin to Marcy Norton's definition of a court animal — and not pet — whose purpose was 'to elicit wonder and convey power'.⁹⁵ As Norton explains, tamed exotic creatures were precious commodities in the colonial powers of Europe. And while, Norton argues, Europeans' penchant for tamed animals was partly inspired by Indigenous (particularly Caribbean and lowland South American) practises of 'familiarisation', Europeans were often far less well equipped to properly look after these tamed creatures.⁹⁶ Many died during their voyages or once in their new homes from neglect or accident. Although as tamed creatures they become a sort of kin, that kinship in the hands of Europeans was approximative or fleeting: Scudéry's chameleons can be situated within this wider phenomenon.

To further complicate the presentation of Scudéry as (proto)eco-feminist, it is important to stress that Scudéry does engage in a 'scientific' empiricism to rival that of Claude Perrault and his *Anatomical Description of the Chameleon*.⁹⁷ Indeed, in the posthumously published 'Description de trois caeméléons' Perrault modified his original description to account for what he had learnt, not only from the dissection of Scudéry's two chameleons, but also her text.⁹⁸ As mentioned above, Scudéry's text is introduced with the following ethology: 'I will instead comment on what I have observed with care ['soin'] and precision ['exactitude']. ' Rather than seeing the 'care' as possessing an affective dimension, in her persuasive reading, Delphine Antoine-Mahut, shows that 'soin' qualifies

95 Marcy Norton, *The Tame and the Wild: People and Animals after 1492* (Harvard University Press, 2024), p. 297.

96 See also Marcy Norton, 'The Chicken or the legue: Human-Animal Relationships and the Columbian Exchange', *The American Historical Review*, 120.1 (2015), pp. 28–60.

97 The intertext here is Perrault's 1669 *Description anatomique*: see Guerrini, *The Courtiers' Anatomist*, pp. 17–49; see also Volpilhac, Herrel and Hoquet. The 1671 edition of the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* was an ornate, folio, limited edition designed as a luxury gift: it is very unlikely that someone like Scudéry would have had her own copy; instead, given her associations with Claude Perrault, Jean Pecquet, a prominent anatomist, and Valentin Conrart, alluded to here, she might have consulted it in their company.

98 Since it is likely Perrault wrote this in spring 1673, although it was not published until 1733 in Bernard de Fontenelle's ten-volume *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences, depuis son établissement en 1666 jusqu'à 1686* (Martin, Coignard, Guérin, 1733), we can assume that Scudéry had circulated her own description long before it was published in 1688. See Sahlins, 'A Tale of Three Chameleons', p. 17, pp. 25–26.

Scudéry's 'exactitude'.⁹⁹ Scudéry's careful precision is evident from the descriptions of the chameleons' bodies: the eyes, the head, movement, and the different colours they possess. The detailed observations, for instance pertaining to their diet and colour, mean that her essay is as much an attempt to advance our understanding of their features and habits as it is to foreground their sensitivity and intelligence or use these chameleons as ciphers for human moral virtues. As Antoine-Mahut shows, Scudéry makes no presuppositions in her observations; and even the instances of anthropomorphism (such as in the description of colour change as related to mood) are there to serve an empirical observation, rather than forming an absolute or ideological position on the animal.¹⁰⁰ In other instances of anthropomorphism, such as the description of the chameleons' friendship or the male's mourning, it is made clear that these relationships are what Scudéry has observed: she does not presuppose anything pre-existent about these creatures.¹⁰¹

Although Scudéry shows good will in attempting to care for the chameleons, the neglect they are subjected to (the friend breaking off the leg; letting the male get too cold while Scudéry herself is ill) also reinforces the hierarchy in which human and animal do not have (nearly) equal status. Some of these descriptions of Méléon — his pale colour, his over-swelling — indicate, as we would now recognise, that the chameleon was unwell, significantly dehydrated and undernourished (for, contrary to Scudéry's opinion, chameleons do need more than air to live on).¹⁰²

That is not to say that the scientific/affective elements are in opposition or are mutually exclusive (this is precisely the sort of binary rejected by critical thinkers such as Vinciane Despret). But it is to suggest a limit to how far Scudéry's writing can be recouped to an ecocritical perspective that seeks to flatten human/animal hierarchies or challenge human-centric knowledge.¹⁰³ Instead, Scudéry is interested

99 Delphine Antoine-Mahut, 'Le défi moral de l'empirisme moderne: Scudéry et ses caméléons', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 112.3 (2024), pp. 299–316 (p. 4).

100 Antoine-Mahut, p. 10.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

102 Antoine Herrel in his Postface to the recent edition examines Scudéry's and Perrault's findings in relation to our contemporary knowledge of chameleons, measuring their accuracy (pp. 177–85). Perrault had also argued for the chameleon needing nourishment.

103 Despret, *What Would Animals Say*.

precisely in this balance between the creature's alterity and its relation to the observer.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, given that Scudéry meets Perrault on his own empirical terms — their differences of opinion are actually points of fact, such as why chameleons change colour; their diet; their capacity to hear; and their affection — we can redirect our interpretation towards Scudéry's own epistemological framework in a way that takes seriously her 'science'. As Antoine-Mahut shows, there are potentially risks in the implicit gendering of Scudéry's philosophy as primarily affective and moral if this denies her a rigorous and scholarly empiricism: she is either worthy of being taken seriously as an empirical philosopher or she is not.¹⁰⁵ Considered in this light, what I think emerges as crucial in this account, alongside her exploration of the chameleons' capacities, is in fact Scudéry's interest in the limitations of empiricism, in the limits of observation: some phenomena cannot be explained.

Scudéry draws attention to such limitations in relation to the chameleons' changes of colour, making a case for uncertainty. She writes:

No-one could have taken more care observing him than I did during these seven months, but I was never able to see a real and convincing cause of the change of colour. Thus, I admire all the apparent reasons that the worthiest men who have written about chameleons have found, but I would thank them also to have admitted admit in good faith that these reasons are not definitively convincing and to have given me the freedom to say that the cause of the variety of colours of a chameleon is hardly less hidden than the cause of the virtues of the lodestone. (p. 117)

Embedded in the comment 'worthiest men' is a long history of reasoning for why the chameleon changes colour (whether according to their environment, their diet, their temperature or their mood), which she also alludes to elsewhere and disproves through her observations. Perrault does not offer a certain cause, but seems to suggest the sun is a contributing factor to the chameleon's colour change and he does not dwell on the uncertainty. Scudéry argues that being colourful seems a sign of a healthy and happy chameleon, however Scudéry ultimately concludes that we cannot know the precise reasons for these changes. Her key contribution is to question the reasons given thus far. She

¹⁰⁴ Antoine-Mahut, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

concludes that we must accept this uncertainty, we must accept not knowing, just as we accept that the lodestone — a naturally occurring magnetic stone — is an example of nature's mysteries. That uncertainty then is part of wider questions about the extent to which one can give a fixed cause to observed phenomena.

The tension between observation and its limits, between reason and uncertainty, between chameleons as objects of science and as affective agents, is also evident from the description of the dissection that closes her account. She writes: 'The Messieurs Perrault and Pecquet of the Royal Academy had asked me to let them know if he died so they could conduct a dissection [...]; I kept my word [...] and took them to Monsieur Conrart's house as he was curious' (p. 119). Manifesting Scudéry's excellent connections with the scientific establishment, this dissection is also a case in point for the limitations of the chameleons' 'subject' rather than 'object' status. It is not so much her decision to have them dissected per se (people show affection in different ways) but the fact that this was always going to be an outcome of her ownership which underscores the tensions between the chameleons' agency and affect on the one hand, and their objectification on the other. She describes what the dissection found with curiosity, comparing her species to the one in the Academy's possession. The dissection proves some of her observations, for instance, that the teeth were not to aid eating. Some elements of their beauty were only discoverable in dissection, including the eye, which is described as like a pearl.¹⁰⁶ Although this amplifies the chameleon's sublimity and wonder, such an analogy might also be seen as an aestheticization of the chameleon's anatomical make-up and thus could map onto an 'artificialisation' of the biological to which the animal machine contributes. In other words, once again we encounter a tension between the animal as subject and as object.¹⁰⁷ Crucially, the dissection also reveals the limitations of observation. For instance, in relation to the chameleons' ability to hear, Scudéry shows there to be a

106 On the topic of the eye, again, we might see the influence of her friend Huet who, as he says in his memoirs, dissected hundreds of animal eyes (*Memoirs of the Life of Peter Daniel Huet, Bishop of Avranches*, trans. by J. Aikin (Longman, 1890), IV, pp. 21–22). On his manuscript correspondence with André Graindorge on this topic, see Shelford, p. 126.

107 On the wonder and sublimation, see Duggan, p. 37. My thanks to Raphaële Garrod for the reading of the pearl.

discrepancy between what she observed from experience and what the dissection shows:

As for their hearing, I am certain from my seven months of experience, that they have a little space between the helmet of their head and their neck, and sounds pass here through some little conduit that is imperceptible to the eye, for I've often remarked that there are such delicate parts which even the most skilful operation cannot reveal. (p. 119)

The tension between object of curiosity and affective pet remains evident to the end of her account: as a memento, she kept the chameleon's dried-out skin, at once object and relic, capturing its complex subject/object status in this text.

I now want to turn attention to the series of poems that close this text, which are read together by the same group of friends who read the account of the chameleons. These eight poems, which fall into different genres of differing lengths (narrative or epic, sonnet, madrigal), which are voiced variously by the male chameleon, the two chameleons, or by Scudéry's acquaintances, have not received much critical attention. To a degree this is understandable given that the poems are perhaps not particularly aesthetically thrilling and there is a strong element of repetition across them, nor do they obviously intersect with the relationship between science and literary culture or with eco-feminism — questions that have dominated the criticism on the chameleon narrative proper. And yet, not only do the poems make up a good two thirds of the text as a whole, and are clearly integrated into it as the same group of friends analyse and introduce them, but they also extend and develop its themes, introduce new literary genres and traditions, particularly classical and Renaissance traditions of animal verse, and also, as I show, knowingly make links with some of the unpublished manuscript poetry exchanged by Scudéry's circle, placing this 'Story' as a whole within a tradition of sociable animal writing. They therefore merit our attention.

In the closing comments of Scudéry's account, we are introduced to 'beautiful and pleasant poems which some friends of mine have written out of affection for me to help keep alive the memory of my two little animals who kept me so entertained while alive and whose deaths have offered me new pleasures thanks to the inventive praise of my friends' (p. 120). The narrator therefore acknowledges that the

authorship is not her own: as they read the poems, the friends allude to the various authors, for the most part without naming them, though some of the poems have an author indicated in the margin (for instance Elie de Bétoulaud, Charles-Claude Genest, Madame de Platbuisson, and Louis Le Laboureur) or otherwise referred to (Anne de la Vigne, Paul Pellisson). And yet, the poems are reproduced here within this volume of *New Moral Conversations*, for which the authorship is known to belong to Scudéry: as such, we see here an example of the collective authorial practices that Joan DeJean associates with salon writing in this period.¹⁰⁸

The first and longest of the poems, 'The Chameleon', divided into three cantos and told partly in the first person by the chameleon, introduces key elements that emerge from across all eight poems, elements which are not evident in the main part of the 'Story': France as 'civilised' compared to Egypt where the chameleon is from; literary tradition, particularly allegory, aetiology, mock funeral poems, and animal epitaphs; and the poet's power to confer immortality. Themes that are present in the main narrative are also continued, namely the chameleon's fidelity and relationship with 'Sapho' or Scudéry, who is also known as 'Palmis'. This poem tells the story of how in ancient Memphis the chameleon once had a human form, and that he was inconstant in relationships: 'in change alone was I constant' (p. 122). The god, Osiris, exacted punishment and turned him into a changeable creature appropriate for his fickle nature: a chameleon. With this anecdote, we get both a fabular origin narrative in the manner of Aesop and Ovid and an allegorical one that recalls popular Renaissance emblem books, in which chameleons were associated with inconstancy.¹⁰⁹ We are then told that the chameleon resolved to attempt fidelity, in friendship at least, and, overhearing by the Nile 'two Africans' praising France and Palmis and exhorting the beasts of Egypt to go to France to learn to be 'civilised', he heeds this call and is delighted by what he finds in France and by the affection and tenderness of Palmis. He is so keen to welcome her home after her brief absence that he launches himself across the room and falls to his death, moments before her arrival. The evident

108 Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 94–114.

109 On this sort of 'galant' version of Ovid, see Marie-Claire Chatelain, *Ovide savant, Ovide galant: Ovide en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Champion, 2008).

bathos and humour of this depiction of the hubristic and over-reaching chameleon is also conveyed with some sympathy and pathos: Palmis, so moved, plans a huge funeral for him which comprises the third canto, as a convoy follows him to 'Atys', glossed in the margins as Conrart's house, and after Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, has delivered the oration, 'Theodamus' (glossed as Conrart), pens the epitaph, telling the passerby to be consoled by the chameleon's fidelity and to honour and preserve his memory.

In the seven poems that follow, many of these elements are repeated: the vaunting of France over Egypt through the same tale of the chameleon overhearing the discussion on the banks of the Nile and deciding to find the French Sapho. Across these accounts, we are told that the chameleon felt no regret despite his demise, having discovered his faithful love for Scudéry (and thus experienced moral correction) and because France will also afford him an immortality and renown he otherwise would not have possessed. This demonstrates the superior positioning of France's literary tradition, of its greatness; in other words, only French (rather than African) poets can confer immortality. And Sapho, or Scudéry, whose other works are alluded to, is most accomplished at conveying this immortality. Not only do the poems consistently take a comparative perspective, with France always surpassing Egypt, but the language of 'barbarity' and 'savagery' further evokes (and celebrates) France's contemporary projects of colonial expansion and can be seen as but one instance of race making in Scudéry's works.¹¹⁰ That allusion is made explicit in the description of the beaver in the funeral convoy who is capable of grief, 'despite being brought up among the Hurons' ('The Chameleon', Canto 3, p. 134). Hurons (Huron-Wendats), Iroquoian-speaking North American Indigenous peoples living along the Saint Laurence river encountered the French mariner and colonialist Jacques Cartier in 1534, and between 1634–55, Jesuits established the New France settlement along this river, as part of France's wider colonial incursions into North America. The beaver reference itself is not incidental: beaver-

110 On 'the complicity of early modern [...] women of white European descent in the production of race', see Kimberly Anne Coles, "'Undisciplined': Early Modern Women's Writing and the Urgency of Scholarly Activism', *Criticism*, 63.1–2 (2021), pp. 55–62 (p. 56); see also Kimberly Anne Coles, *Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

fur was an important resource from the area. The reference here to the beaver among the Hurons emphasises France's contemporary greatness.

The evocation of Egypt is also a playful way of providing an 'exotic' setting for the subtle engagement with the debate in France at the time over the relative superiority of Ancient (in particular Graeco-Roman) and Modern (that is, French and contemporary) literature: Egypt becomes allegorically a paradigmatic place of antiquity.¹¹¹ The many epitaphs to the pet chameleon included in Scudéry's narrative evoke a long tradition of pet epistles that goes back to ancient examples, including: (pseudo)Anacreon's *Ode to a Pigeon* (a poem alluded to in Scudéry's Pigeon cycle below); Ovid's *Amores* 2.6, lamenting the death of the parrot belonging to Corinna; and Catullus 2, an ode to Lesbia's sparrow, evoked in Canto 3 of 'The Chameleon'. However, Scudéry inflects a French take on this tradition, drawing on more recent Renaissance pet epistles and on contemporary 'burlesque' and 'galant' poetry, in which the animal narrator is used for ironic effect.¹¹² For instance, Vincent Voiture, 'galant' poet par excellence, is evoked; and that ironic humour is evident in these poems: for example, we are told that the chameleon is as 'mute as a fish' now he is no longer a man, but that Scudéry gave him the power of speech ('The Chameleon'). As we will see in the next section, the playful affordances of speech to the chameleon could also be seen as ludic engagement with the debate about animal capacities. The poems, read by fictional characters but glossed as being by Scudéry's real acquaintances, exemplify a light-hearted, modern, 'galant' approach to poetic traditions and a sociable practice of sharing poetry whereby the humour in part relied on the specific context of exchange.

These printed poems often specifically recall the manuscript poems exchanged by Scudéry's circle. There are a couple of references to the other animals in Scudéry's literary menagerie, such as warblers and

111 Thanks to Anne Spica on this point. For a similar evocation of Egyptian mythology in the poetry of Antoinette Deshoulières, see Sophie Tonolo, ed. *Madame Deshoulières: Poésies* (Garnier: 2010), p. 402; see also Helena Taylor, 'Antoinette Deshoulières's 'Cat: Polemical Equivocation in Salon Verse', *Romanic Review*, 112. 3 (2021), pp. 452–469.

112 For the Renaissance tradition, see Jean Lemaire de Belges, *Les Epîtres de l'amant vert*, ed. by Jean Frappier (Droz, 1948); Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Poèmes de P. de Ronsard*, 6 vols (Buon, 1567), III, pp. 148–50, 150–53; Joachim Du Bellay, *Divers jeux rustiques and et autres œuvres poétiques* (Morel, 1558), pp. 69, 73. See also 'The Animal Eulogy in France', in Annette Tomarken, *The Smile of Truth: The French Satirical Eulogy and its Antecedences* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 199–229.

pigeons, and thus to the manuscript poems familiar to some of her readers. Bérénice makes it clear that she is selecting certain poems to share with her friends from a much larger set: “‘Here it is,’ said Berenice, ‘but do not ask me for more for I have only chosen this one, although I have at least as many others left’” (p. 147). There are two additional chameleon poems in the manuscript material, where the Platbuisson epitaph is also penned (and Platbuisson plays a key role in the ‘Story of the Turtledoves’ from MS Conrart that I will analyse below)¹¹³ — perhaps Bérénice’s allusions self-consciously evoke these other chameleon poems, thus further anchoring this ‘Story’ in the tradition of sociable animal poetry. The framing narrative itself allows for an exposition of sociable reading practices as we see characters respond to these poems — and Scudéry’s observations — in a playful *mise-en-abyme*. Scudéry’s fictional characters talk about the real Scudéry’s ownership of chameleons while reading her text in a fictional setting, thus fictionalising both it and its author, while also reading poems which elsewhere were presented as circulating between, for instance, the real Platbuisson and Scudéry, using their *salon-pen* names, Célie and Sapho. The ‘salon’ then is knowingly both a historical and an imagined space, the ‘role-playing’ is both a social and a literary practice, as we will see in the manuscript poetry, which I will now explore.

Manuscript Animals

A significant amount of animal material by or connected to Scudéry was not published but was circulated in manuscripts. The manuscript animal poems selected here for discussion and translation are those which connect most clearly with the published text on the chameleons and will be studied less for what they might reveal about the sociological dynamics of the salon and more with an emphasis on literary playfulness and exchange. They include three chameleon poems; three poems about Sapho’s dead pigeon (two of which are attributed to ‘Acante’, a pseudonym for Scudéry’s friend, Paul Pellisson); and one of the many

113 This epitaph is referred to in Scudéry’s ‘Histoire de la morale’ (from *New Moral Conversations*, 1688) with a four-line poem, attributed to Madame Platbuisson in the margin, stressing the fidelity of the turtledoves, I, p. 166.

poems featuring Sapho's *fauvette* or warbler¹¹⁴ — all of which share common tropes with the printed chameleon poems.¹¹⁵ My selection also includes a longer 'Story of Turtledoves' which features further pigeon poems and stages an exchange between Scudéry and Madame de Platbuisson, author of one of the published chameleon poems.¹¹⁶ These poems are contained across two manuscripts: the chameleons, pigeons and turtledoves are in the MS 'Conrart' and the warblers in the MS 'Tallemant des Réaux'.¹¹⁷ Valentin Conrart, the first secretary of the *Académie Française*, and secretary of the King, is also the 'Theodamus' of the Chameleon funeral poem (p. 135) and the acquaintance at whose house Scudéry's chameleon was dissected, as described above.¹¹⁸ As Alain Niderst shows, the majority of these manuscript poems date from the mid-1660s: specifically January 1664 for the Turtledoves sequence; and between October 1664 and January 1665 for the first two pigeon poems by 'Acante'.¹¹⁹ They date, therefore, from the years in which Pellisson, Scudéry's dear friend, was imprisoned for his association with Nicolas Fouquet, the King's disgraced finance minister (1661–66).¹²⁰

114 La Rochelle, Bibliothèque de La Rochelle, MS Tallemant des Réaux 673, fol. 241; in *Le Manuscrit 673 de Tallemant des Réaux*, ed. by Vincenette Maigne (Klincksieck, 1994), pp. 622–23.

115 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 'Conrart' 5420.1, fol. 119–26, fol. 209–10, fol. 424.

116 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 'Conrart' 5420.2, fol. 1159–91. This is also included in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 'Conrart' 5418, fol. 827–45, where it is entitled 'pièces en prose et en vers à propos de la pigeonne et des tourterelles de Sapho (Mlle de Scudéry) et de Conrart.'

117 The MS Conrart held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in the Arsenal contains around 50 *recueils* deriving from Parisian literary circles. The history of this manuscript means that its current ordering and organisation is due to the conservation work by mid eighteenth-century bibliophile, Simon Vanel de Milsonneau. See <https://www.bnf.fr/fr/les-recueils-conrart>; see also Henri Martin, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la bibliothèque de l'Arsenal*, 8 vols (Plon, Nourrit and Cie, 1885–99), VIII, pp. 190–201; and Nicolas Schapira, *Un professionnel des lettres au XVIIe siècle: Valentin Conrart, une histoire sociale* (Champ Vallon, 2003).

118 The MS Tallemant des Réaux, a collection by Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux (1619–92), best known today for his *Historiettes*, a satirical series of biographies of authors and intellectuals of his day, is held in the library of La Rochelle, his place of birth. These texts, organised by Tallemant himself, are collected from the wide period of 1649–90, and are, as Vincenette Maigne demonstrates in the modern critical edition of this manuscript, gathered in a loose chronological order: see Maigne, p. 36.

119 Alain Niderst, *Madeleine de Scudéry: on the Turtledoves*, see pp. 455–62; the Pigeon, see pp. 465–68; the Warbler, see pp. 374–76 and p. 421.

120 Upon his release in 1666, Pellisson regained Royal favour and became historiographer to the King; and continued to write poetry, including an important published

Animal poems such as these are part of what Miriam Speyer describes as a wider ‘galant bestiary’ of playful verse that includes La Fontaine’s well-known *Fables*, as well as various published collections of miscellaneous poetry which featured animals, such as the Pellisson-La Suze collection, and poems published in the periodical, the *Mercurie Galant*.¹²¹ These bestiaries often privileged local animals (warblers, cats, dogs) over exotic animals and cover a wide range of poetic genres, including the burlesque and even erotic. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to Antoinette Deshoulières’s animal verse, and as mentioned above, it is possible to read the ironic and ludic voicing of animals as a counterweight to the contemporary dismissal of animals as machines, while remaining attentive to the playful elusiveness of voice and persona present in these poems: for Speyer ‘to be *galant* is to be anti-Cartesian’.¹²²

The manuscript chameleon and pigeon poems pick up on the very same themes of mock encomium and a playful reflection on poetic genre (for instance, when the epic pretensions of the poet are scaled back — ‘muse you are flying too high’ (p. 159)), that we encountered above in the printed chameleon poems. Importantly, the chameleon’s and pigeon’s fidelity to Scudéry is emphasised. That theme of fidelity is also key to the most sustained animal narrative in the manuscripts: the 26-page ‘Story of Turtledoves’. The story stages an exchange of New Year’s gifts and poems between Sapho and Célie (Scudéry and Platbuisson), as well as others, which celebrate the constancy and fidelity of the turtledoves, allowing Platbuisson to compare this to her friendship with Sapho. The story is a homage to friendship that somewhat resembles the lessons of the *Carte de Tendre*, with the animals as metaphors for fidelity and constancy. Sincere love may best be found where passions are not. There is also a playful, meta-reflection on the very sociability and friendship being promoted: friends entertain each other with little games, write to each other using pseudonyms and avatars, demonstrating their

collection of verse with La Comtesse de la Suze, which itself contains warbler poems: *Recueil de pieces galantes, en prose et en vers, de Mme la Comtesse de La Suze et de M. Pelisson* (Quinet, 1668) — see ‘La Fauvette, dialogue entre Acante [Pellisson] et la Fauvette’, p. 57; and ‘Suite de la Fauvette’, pp. 1–10.

121 Miriam Speyer, ‘La poule de Sylvie et le pigeon de Sapho: le bestiaire galant des recueils collectifs de la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle’, *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 46 (2019), pp. 37–52.

122 Taylor, ‘Antoinette Deshoulières’s Cat’; Speyer, p. 43.

friendship through these acts of exchange and jokes.¹²³ As Niderst argues, there is also a certain melancholy strain to the mood of this text: Scudéry suggests that she has not been creative or witty for two and a half years, since, that is, the arrest of Pellisson; and she and Platbuisson lament the lack of constancy in love.¹²⁴

The 'Story of the Turtledoves' ends with three further poems featuring Sapho's pigeon, this time in dialogue with the pigeon of the ancient Greek lyric poet, Anacreon: the first is from Anacreon's pigeon to Sapho's, the second from Sapho's pigeon to Anacreon's, and the third from Sapho to her pigeon. Anacreon was an important figure in the literary circles to which Scudéry belonged.¹²⁵ Often twinned in Scudéry's time with Sapho (as both were Greek lyric poets) and with Ovid (as poets of sentiment), Anacreon was taken up as a poet of sociability, sentiment and lyric. He features in Scudéry's novel, *Clélie*, and was influential on her contemporaries, such as Antoinette Deshoulières and Jean de La Fontaine, thanks to his translations into French.¹²⁶ Anacreon's original pigeon poem starts with an address to the pigeon and is then voiced by the pigeon who explains that he was first sent by Anacreon to Bathyllus (his male lover), then taken by Cupid, but now prefers to perform tasks for Anacreon. This lifestyle suits him as he eats from Anacreon's hand rather than having to forage, drinks the wine with which the poet celebrates his lovers, dances after drinking, and watches the poet while he plays the lyre and even gets to sleep on the lyre himself.¹²⁷ The bird's life resembles that of the poet and his art

123 For more on the insularity and exclusion of these games and on the use of pseudonyms, see Duggan 'Adults at play'.

124 Niderst, p. 458.

125 These are poems in we would now call the pseudo-Anacreontic tradition or the Anacreontea, but which were attributed to Anacreon in this period. See Stéphanie Loubère, 'Figures et figuration d'Anacréon galant', in *La Galanterie des anciens*, ed. by Nathalie Grande and Claudine Nédélec, *Littératures Classiques*, 77 (2012), pp. 83–98; and Sophie Tonolo, 'Les métamorphoses d'Anacréon chez Mme Deshoulières: effets d'une tradition philologique et philosophique sur son lyrisme pastoral', *Revue Fontenelle*, 10 (2012), pp. 181–97. The translations are: Rémi Belleau, *Les odes d'Anacréon, traduites de grec en françois* (Wechel, 1556); Anne Dacier, [LeFèvre], *Les poésies d'Anacréon et de Sapho* (Thierry, 1681); and Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre, *Les Poésies de Anacréon et de Sapho* (Émery, 1684).

126 See Taylor, *Women Writing Antiquity*, pp. 88–89, pp. 163–66.

127 This is poem 15 in modern editions of the Anacreontea. See *Greek Lyric II: Anacreon, Anacreontea, Choral Lyric from Olympus to Alcman*, ed. and trans. by David Campbell, Loeb Classical Library 143 (Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 181–82.

is valued. The poem closes: 'there, you know it all. Go away: you have made me more talkative than a crow'.

Scudéry draws on Anacreon's reflection on the lyric form, and the well-known figure of the bird as poet, as a playful way of thinking about the status of her own poetry. Her version echoes this meta-poetic comparison between the refined lyric poet and the talkative crow as Anacreon's pigeon is disdainful towards that of Sapho. He calls her a 'little harpy' and a 'little rascal', noting his distinction: 'am I not the only pigeon / To whom Jupiter has offered / [...] The privilege of telling a story?' (p. 177). The poems also seem to contain a subtle engagement with the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. The reply by Sapho's pigeon is curt and goading: criticising his age — Anacreon's persona was often an older man — stating that 'France surpasses Greece'; and even provoking him: 'I will happily concede to you/ When your master, Anacreon/ Beats my Mistress' (p. 178). Sapho, in the next and final poem, then remonstrates her pigeon for her rudeness: 'you speak like a Gascon/ your zeal has run away with you' (Gascon referring to dialect, that is, an 'improper' French). Anacreon's pigeon is praised and Sapho closes: 'I do not claim to equal him/It is not for you to speak of it/This is why, my dear Mignonne,/ You must concede to his pigeon' (p. 179). And yet, as Myriam Dufour-Maître argues, in this 'concession', in which politeness, restraint, modesty ('you must be sweet and submissive') serve to show up the roughness of the language of Anacreon's pigeon, Sapho marks a triumph for the Moderns: the last polite word overrules the apparent concession it contains (p. 178).¹²⁸

These manuscript poems thus shed important light on Scudéry's 'galant' bestiary, drawing out the literary elements of the poems in her Chameleon story and making exchange a common motif across her work, as here poetic exchange parallels the dialectical rhetoric of her conversations. By bringing together this material we come to appreciate the complexity of Scudéry's animals: her playful literary animals and her observed animals do question the animal-machine, but she also uses them to experiment with animals as literary and scientific objects. While she is evidently unsure about elements of 'new science', and the philosophical modernity as represented by Descartes, she also takes a

128 Dufour-Maître, *Les Précieuses*, p. 337.

‘Moderne’ side in the literary *querelle*. This does not appear illogical in her work, but is a discrepancy that might challenge endogenous historical regimes and favour instead an emic methodology, reminding us that those regimes are often built around a small corpus of texts and authors. In the final section, we will explore this further, turning once again to the question of uncertainty, faith and genre in Scudéry’s story of the pre-Socratic atomist and ‘laughing philosopher’: Democritus.

Fictions of Democritus: ‘The Story of Prince Ariamene’ and ‘On Butterflies’

‘The Story of Prince Ariamene’

In the second volume of Scudéry’s *Moral Dialogues* (1692), we encounter a series of intermingled texts, all centred on the figure of Democritus. Included as the fourth chapter is a conversation, ‘On Butterflies’, which describes Théràmène and a group of friends as they prepare to read a further text, ‘Observations on Butterflies’. ‘On Butterflies’ relates to the third story of the collection, a historical narrative, ‘The Story of Prince Ariamene’, which is read out by the same group of friends and is apparently a translation of work in Greek contained within the same bundle of manuscripts as the ‘Observations of Butterflies’. ‘The Story of Prince Ariamene’ includes, as a supporting character, a fictionalised Democritus, who is said to be the author of these very ‘Observations on Butterflies’. Once we get to ‘On Butterflies’, we quickly discover that the ‘Observations’ are not in fact by Democritus but rather a ‘friend of the translator’ of the (fictitious) manuscript, a certain ‘Democrite moderne’ (p. 215). In the original edition there is a marginal note both here, and at the beginning of the ‘Observations’, referring to ‘M. Betoul’, that is Élie de Bétoulaud, author of the first Chameleon poem from ‘The Story of Two Chameleons’, explored above.¹²⁹ The attribution is significant, linking as it does these two texts; and pointing again to collective practices of

129 Élie de Bétoulaud (1640?–1709), poet, and author of a number of short published poems dedicated to Scudéry and multiple manuscript poems. He was also a Bordeaux lawyer and collector who commissioned the Chateau de Ferrand, now well-known as a winery.

authorship associated with Scudéry and her circle. Steeping readers in this tangled web of manuscripts, partially anonymous (pseudo?)-translators, and even pseudo-Democritus, Scudéry draws attention to questions of knowledge transmission and the related intermingling of history and fiction, the purview of her *vraisemblable* (plausible) historical fiction, as I will explore.

In 'The Story of Prince Ariamene' Scudéry continues her interest in ancient Persia from earlier in her career; but instead of telling the story of Cyrus the Great, it is set a little later during the reign of Darius the Great, recounting the succession of his two sons, Ariamene and Xerxes, and their love interests, Amestris and Palmis — the latter a character invented by Scudéry. As Marie-Gabrielle Lallemand suggests, Darius's court 'is presented as the epitome of *galant* society'.¹³⁰ Darius welcomes Democritus who is passing through on his travels, furnishing him with a pavilion in the palace gardens. Scudéry's Democritus is introduced as 'the most learned of philosophers' and as author of a range of works, including on none other than the chameleon, perhaps recalling for the reader Scudéry's earlier writing on this subject, and so further connecting these conversations.¹³¹

More widely, in depicting a fictional Democritus, Scudéry was engaging with the tradition of lives of Democritus. As Christoph Lüthy has shown, the main source for information about Democritus's life was Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*, a work that had been translated into French in 1602 and again in 1669, and proved an influential source for many of Scudéry's historical fictions.¹³² In Diogenes Laertius's account, Democritus is an atomist philosopher, well-travelled — including to Persia¹³³ — admirer of Pythagoras, prognostician, long

130 Marie-Gabrielle Lallemand, 'La moraliste et la romancière: étude des trois dernières nouvelles de Mademoiselle de Scudéry', in *Madeleine de Scudéry: une femme de lettres au XVII^e siècle*, ed. by Denis and Spica, pp. 79–91 (p. 86).

131 Pliny the Elder mentions Democritus's authorship of a text on chameleons (*Historia Naturalis*, 8.120–2) and this is referenced by Claude Perrault: see *Description anatomique d'un caméléon*, ed. by Volpillac et al., pp. 117–54 (p. 119).

132 Christoph Lüthy, 'The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science', *Isis*, 91.3 (2000), pp. 443–79. François Fougerolles, *Le Diogène français tiré du grec ou Diogène Laërtien touchant les vies traduites et paraphrasées sur le grec par M. François de Fougerolles* (Lyon: Huguetan, 1602); Gilles Boileau, *Diogène Laërce, De la vie des philosophes. Traduction nouvelle. Par M. B** (Sercy, 1668). On lives, see also Dinah Ribard, *Vivre, Raconter, Penser: Histoire de philosophes 1650–1766* (Vrin, 2003).

133 Pliny, Petronius and Seneca had also described him travelling to ancient Persia. The

lived and an example of one who 'died well', having prevailed over death for three days. This final story is one of several anecdotes about him that get recycled and retold (others being that he squandered his inheritance and so was banned from his city but made his fortune back again though his learning; that Plato did not like him and burnt his books).

Democritus was also known widely in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as 'the laughing philosopher', thanks to works by Cicero and Horace; and from the time of Seneca and Lucian, Democritus was paired with his antithesis, Heraclitus, 'the weeping philosopher'.¹³⁴ This was a powerful myth in the Renaissance, spawning the neologism 'democriticus' (critic of the people), and in the seventeenth century, an image of *Democritus ridens* was often used as a frontispiece on books of jokes or riddles.¹³⁵ That laughing figure could range from a fool to a serious critic of politics, religion and customs. As we will see, these representations also make their way into Scudéry's account of the philosopher.

As Lüthy shows, there were two further influential versions of Democritus in the Renaissance: that of the 'moralising anatomist' and of an alchemist. Both can be traced in Scudéry's account. Democritus as figure for the alchemist derived from the idea that he was the author of a miscellany of alchemical recipes and writing gathered together and published in Latin in 1573 in Padua.¹³⁶ The 'moralising anatomist' was based on an anecdote about Democritus found in an ancient Greek collection of letters, supposedly to or by the physician Hippocrates.¹³⁷ In 'Letter to Damagetus', the physician Hippocrates reports on the visit he paid to Democritus, having been summoned by the citizens of Abdera who thought the philosopher was insane. Hippocrates found Democritus, unkempt, sitting under a tree examining an animal

Emperor Julian wrote in a letter that Democritus had been requested by Darius to console him on the death of his wife. See Piero Schiavo, 'Prevailing over Death: Democritus and the Myth of a Philosophical Death', in *Life and Death in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Susan James (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 197–208; see also the entry on Democritus in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, cinquième édition (Brandmuller, 1738), 4 vols, II, 269–75.

134 Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.35; Horace, *Epistulae*, 2.1.194; Seneca, *De Ira*, 2.10.5. Scudéry makes more of this contrast in the discussion about Democritus (and Heraclitus) in the *Histoire de la morale*, pp. 94–98.

135 See Lüthy, p. 459 for his image on a 1632 *Lustiger Democritus*.

136 Ibid., pp. 471–78.

137 For the first edition, see *Epistolae Diogenis, interprete Francisco Aretino: Accedunt Bruti et Hippocratis epistolae ex versione Rinuccii* (Florence: Venetus, 1487).

carcass — not, in fact, insane, but examining the black bile of the dead animal and investigating melancholy. The ensuing conversation proves influential on Hippocrates who begins himself to apply Democritus's anatomical practice. This letter was key to seventeenth-century conceptions of Democritus, evident, for instance, in the pen name of 'Democritus junior' used by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).¹³⁸ Scudéry's 'Democrite' also continues these traditions: as both the advising sage and as one interested in what are described as the 'secrets of nature' (p. 192). Above all, what this tradition shows is that Democritus was 'always already' fictionalised across the many stories of his life: as Kathryn Murphy has argued, he was associated with plural personae, both in such stories and, more subtly, perhaps, because of the associations in Lucretius of Epicureanism (and Democritus) with multiple worlds and duplicate selves.¹³⁹ Scudéry engages self-consciously with that plurality when writing her own fictional version of Democritus. We might also see the plurality he represents as intrinsic to the multiplicity of views, of forms, and of traditions in her work, paralleling the epistemological significance of variety that we have seen to be a key method of her *Conversations*.

Scudéry seems attune to the necessary fictionalisation inherent in doxography — writing the opinions of others — in the way she discusses the possible attribution of the 'Observations on Butterflies' to Democritus. Even when the friends decide that Democritus did not write the 'Observations on Butterflies', they say that he could have, and that he would not have done it better himself if he had. The attribution is described as 'vraisemblable' or plausible (p. 185). In 'On Uncertainty', Timandre draws attention to this very lack of certainty inherent to doxography: 'How do we even know if we are correct in what we think were the feelings of past philosophers since uncertainty reigns in history as it does elsewhere' (p. 96). Scudéry thereby injects a meta-reflection on

138 See Lüthy, p. 468.

139 Kathryn Murphy, 'Numberless Democrituses: Robert Burton, Personation, and the Proliferating Self', unpublished talk at RSA, Boston, March 2025. Palingenesis (the possibility of body's atoms to be reconfigured into a new body, which without preservation of memory, would mean 'nothing to us') is mentioned in Lucretius 3.847ff; in this same book he also talks about Democritus's death. See also James Warren, 'Ancient Atomists on the Plurality of Worlds', *The Classical Quarterly*, 54.2 (2004), pp. 354–65 and James Warren, 'Lucretian Palingenesis Recycled', *The Classical Quarterly*, 51.2 (2001), pp. 499–508.

the operations of the genre of historical fiction, and a claim to legitimacy for this genre, since her story of Democritus is plausible, if not necessarily true. The term '*vraisemblable*' not only features in relation to genre but also emerges as a key term in the discussions of atomism in both in the fiction about Democritus and in '*On Uncertainty*'. In the latter, Timandre describes atomist theory as '*plausible*', and the friends agree that things can be plausible without being certain (p. 87). As we will see in '*The Story of Prince Ariamene*', Democritus talks about the distinction between truth and plausibility: there are things which are true though not plausible and things which are plausible but not true. Scudéry seems to be embedding in this sequence of texts connections between literary imagination and approaches to natural philosophy, both on an intradiegetic level, that is, within the discussions in the text, and on an extradiegetic level, in relation to the genre in which she is writing. Scudéry demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between the art of the probable (dialectic) and the articulation of epistemic change: the '*probable*' is essential as both a rhetorical mode (as in *vraisemblable* fiction and dialectical conversations) and an epistemological one (as in probable or plausible knowledge). The effect of this is to thoroughly embed genre and style within her wider epistemological examination: this is not philosophy reclothed as '*light-hearted*', or '*entertaining*', not complex ideas made '*frivolous*' by a fictional setting, but a far-reaching modal enquiry.

Within '*The Story of Prince Ariamene*', Scudéry pursues her interest in atomism and the nature of learned discussion through the figure of Democritus. Democritus is presented as being more used to communicating with philosophers than people of the court, but then becomes the model vulgariser, using common and everyday references, as he explains in brief his ideas to a group of women who want to be informed about his theory of atoms. The group is not persuaded by it. Palmis says that while she could be persuaded that rocks and mountains are made of atoms, she cannot believe this extends to '*all the stars and even the sun and all the beauties of the universe*' (p. 190). As in '*On Uncertainty*', the role of chance is disputed. Artabase then engages Democritus in a long exchange about the limits of what we can assume to know in the face of an omnipotent divine creator, drawing on his experience of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Artabase, like Aristene, argues that reason assures us of God's existence: he

also advances an argument by faith, in so far as God cannot, indeed should not, be perfectly understood but still people believe in his power. Although in both 'On Uncertainty' and 'The Story of Prince Ariamene' it is made clear which side is morally correct (that which accepts faith as certain), the discussion is nuanced by virtue of different views being explored at all, as discussed above.

Scudéry also uses Democritus to reflect on genre and the interaction of poetry and philosophy. Within the story, Amestris asks Democritus to write her a treatise on butterflies. Ariamene persuades Democritus to do so and uses this as a chance to court Amestris by adding to this treatise a series of poems about butterflies, intended to flatter her. Although the treatise is not shared with the reader in 'The Story of Prince Ariamene' (it is the 'Observations on Butterflies' we get to read later on), we *do* get to read the poems on butterflies that are included with it. As with the atom poems in 'On Uncertainty' and the chameleon ones in 'The Story of Two Chameleons', 'scientific' discussion and literary genres are combined within the same work. The beauty of the butterflies is compared to that of Amestris and they will renounce their inconstant ways to pay homage to her. Echoes of the chameleon poems also abound here and are further reinforced by a marginal note which suggests that the author of this poem is a 'M. Betoul', none other than Élie de Bétoulaud, the 'modern' Democritus and author of one of the published Chameleon poems. Combining the butterfly poems with the observations epitomises the recurring interplay between the literary or symbolic animal and the observed animal as object of science that we have traced thus far in Scudéry's work. Further, the very composition of this menagerie is playful. It is surely no coincidence that the animals Scudéry includes for scientific observation — the chameleon and the butterfly — are also both part of a longstanding tradition associated not only with the sublime (the butterfly as soul in antiquity; the chameleon as living on air alone) but also with inconstancy. Across these works, though, as we have seen, they are 'converted' to fidelity, to the example of her most overtly 'literary' animals, known primarily for their fidelity: the turtledoves and pigeons. Can we map the literary animals onto a philosophical position? The butterflies' inconstancy could be paralleled with the uncertainty these texts discuss and just as the butterflies (and chameleons) are transformed into symbols of fidelity, to equal the

turtledoves and pigeon, so too does faith, supported in part by reason, offer a counterpart to uncertainty.¹⁴⁰

But Democritus is not just a counterexample whose views are to be refuted. The fictional Democritus models the sort of amicable disagreement that structures Scudéry's *Conversations*. Although his ideas fail to persuade, his manner and methods are well received. While it is made clear that Democritus is associated by history with satirical mockery, the laughter of Scudéry's Democritus is not disdainful. Almost every time he speaks it is with some form of 'pleasant smile' such that the usual epithet is repurposed to denote gallant cordiality. Disagreement is always convivial: 'he was asked innumerable questions to which he always replied agreeably without getting annoyed if he was contradicted: he just laughed and that entertained the whole court' (p. 184). He also recognises the limitations of his role and accepts them: 'Democritus, realising that his new doctrine would not be well received in the palace of Darius, did not insist on talking about it as a philosopher' (p. 190). He avoids the jargon and pedantry that is associated by Scudéry with philosophers both in this 'Story' and in 'On Uncertainty' where, as we saw, 'speaking as a philosopher' is contrasted with agreeable conversation. Laura Burch persuasively reads that contrast as an opposition to speaking exclusively and repetitively of philosophy and instead promoting creativity and diversity of opinion: '[Scudéry] insists on a practice that leaves these questions open'.¹⁴¹ But keeping things open in this work necessarily entails accepting that we are limited in what we can know perfectly: that openness is not infinite. As we will now see, that position is reinforced by the reaction of the friends to Democritus's story in 'On Butterflies'.

'On Butterflies'

The group of friends react to 'The Story of Prince Ariamene' by focussing on the question of curiosity and the limits of enquiry. Cleomire asks why Artabase, when talking to Democritus, did not refer to the substances of

140 I am grateful to Raphaële Garrod for this connection.

141 Laura J. Burch, 'Madeleine de Scudéry: peut-on parler de la femme philosophe?', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 138.3 (2013), pp. 361–75 (p. 373).

lodestones and quinine 'to show him that there are things which we consider to be true, but which one cannot know perfectly' (p. 205). Theramène explains that knowledge of lodestone is ancient (he quotes Pliny the Elder),¹⁴² but that quinine has only recently been discovered thanks to European voyages to South America, so Democritus would not have known of this substance.¹⁴³ Since, according to Aristotle, Democritus *also* talked about lodestones in relation to the atom, using his theory of the infinite number and size of atoms to explain magnetism, Cleomire's proposition suggests that Democritus ought not to have tried to explain magnetism, undermining both his atomism and desire to know things perfectly.¹⁴⁴

Theramène then reads aloud a poem celebrating quinine, showing it to be superior to the other 'mysterious' substance, the lodestone, in another example of a verse engagement with a topic otherwise treated scientifically. This poem would surely have been intended to evoke Jean de La Fontaine's 'Poème au quinquina' (1682), an ode to this medicine and its famous healing of the King's fever. La Fontaine's long poem in two cantos describes the debilitating effects of fever and then the healing properties of quinine, hailing its cure of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Prince Condé and other members of the royal household, including Louis XIV.¹⁴⁵ La Fontaine's poem stages the bringing together of 'science' and 'literature': La Fontaine wishes to be a 'disciple of Lucretius for a second time' (the first being in his *Discours à Madame de la Sablière*) and asks his protectrice, Marie-Anne de Mancini, to favour him 'as he philosophises in the language of the gods'.¹⁴⁶ As Philippe Chométy shows, this poem stages the combining of literary and scientific language as a meta

142 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. by W. H. S. Jones (Harvard University Press, 1956), Loeb Classical Library 393, VII, 34. 42.

143 Quinine was discovered to the West in 1631 in Peru.

144 For Democritus, lodestones and iron have similar atoms and those of the lodestone permeate the iron, causing the iron atoms to stream out towards the stone. Descartes discusses and refutes this in his *Principes de la Philosophie* (1647).

145 Jean de La Fontaine, *Poème du quinquina* (Thierry, 1682). By 1680, prominent French doctors were extolling the virtues of quinine and La Fontaine's poem draws on the work of his medical friend, François de la Salle (known as Monginet) who wrote the *Traité de la Guérison des Fièvres par le Quinquina* in 1679. See Beverly S. Ridgely, "Disciple de Lucrèce Une Seconde Fois": A Study of La Fontaine's 'Poème Du Quinquina', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 11.2 (1971), pp. 92–122.

146 La Fontaine, *Poème du quinquina*, p. 2, p. 18.

reflection on the way in which language can represent fever.¹⁴⁷

In writing her own quinine poem, then, and linking it to Louis XIV, Scudéry aligns her work with this learned tradition that stems back to Lucretius. And yet, Scudéry seems to use the poem for a celebratory purpose, as a vehicle for expressing wonder, rather than as a way of describing the properties and functions of its object. Rather than tracing, as La Fontaine does, the nature of fever, the origins and extraction of quinine, its operations on the body, and the role of the doctor, she places much greater emphasis on the sheer wonder of this 'mysterious' substance. Instead of using medical language that attempts a forensic discussion of quinine's properties, as La Fontaine does, she uses metaphor ('disarm') and the language associated with divine mystery ('miracle' 'secret virtues', p. 206). This focus on wonder seems confirmed when Clearque, referring to an experiment she witnessed which did not convince her of the cause of the lodestone's magnetic property even if it demonstrated the effects, summarises, regarding both lodestone and quinine: 'we ought to admire both these things without presuming to know them well' (p. 207). Here, as in 'The Story of Two Chameleons', and with the same topos of the lodestone, Scudéry is testing out the scope and limitations of empirical knowledge.

Once Theramène has read the 'Observations on Butterflies', the group return to the questions of curiosity and uncertainty. This discussion gets close to articulating the ideal balance between 'good' curiosity, as demonstrated by this group of friends, and 'bad' curiosity that strays too far. In so doing, Scudéry's approach develops the exposition of curiosity in her *Célinde* (1661). In this earlier *nouvelle*, characters in the framing narrative seek to define curiosity, but no clear consensus is achieved, and no one definition or interpretation is favoured: instead, as Kenny shows, the conversation 'overtly dramatises the process by which definitions are proposed and undone' and the following story cannot therefore function as an exemplum because we do not know

147 Philippe Chométy, 'Entre philosophie et langage des dieux: Éléments pour une réhabilitation du Poème du Quinquina de La Fontaine', *Revue des Amis de Jean de La Fontaine*, 17 (2006), pp. 31–40; Gilles Banderier argues that this poem also draws on the learned neo-Latin medical poems of this period, 'Le Poème du Quinquina et la poésie médicale de la Renaissance', *Revue des Amis de Jean de La Fontaine*, 13 (2001), pp. 37–44.

what it is meant to exemplify.¹⁴⁸ By contrast, the end of 'On Butterflies' comes much closer to a moral or judgement, that could be seen to align with Christian scepticism, than Scudéry does in *Célinte*: 'the whole group [...] agreed that the Observations on Butterflies were more plausible and natural than what Democritus said about atoms and that nothing was more certain than worshipping the God of all and fulfilling his law without wanting to define in detail or describe with certainty the way in which it pleased him to have created the universe' (p. 216). Where, in 'On Uncertainty', too much doubt leads one to atheism, in 'On Butterflies' and 'The Story of Prince Ariamene', we are also shown the parallel risks of probing into matters which should be confined only to faith.

'Observations on Butterflies'

This brings us to the text at the heart of this nexus of stories from the 1692 *Moral Dialogues*: the 'Observations on Butterflies'. These Observations comprise a detailed description of different species of butterfly, told, unlike the Chameleons text, without an affective narrator (and when on occasion an opinion is given, the narrator's gender is masculine, perhaps in keeping with the fiction of Democritus's authorship and, as mentioned above, there is an attribution to Elie de Bétoulaud). There is also some overlap between the descriptions of the butterflies and that of Ulysse Aldrovandi in his (Latin) chapter devoted to them from his *De Animalibus insectis* (1602), reprinted in 1638.¹⁴⁹ The orientation towards a more 'impartial' natural history genre is evident from the title. Where 'Observations' recalls the 'observationes' of sixteenth and seventeenth-century non-fiction works in a range of disciplines (astronomy, astrology, philology, natural history, and particularly law and medicine), the French 'Histoire de' of the chameleons suggests a narrative genre, more akin to Scudéry's fictions and *unlike* the Latin 'historia' traditionally

148 Kenny, *Uses of Curiosity*, p. 369, p. 370.

149 See Brian W. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 182–92. Ulysse Aldrovandi, *De Animalibus insectis libri septem cum singulorum iconibus ad vivum expressis autore Ulysse Aldrovando... cum indice copiosissimo* (Bologna: Clemente, 1638). Thanks to Anne Spica for this connection.

used in natural history writing.¹⁵⁰ The 'Observations on Butterflies' open with a brief discussion of the generation of butterflies, surveying the various theories offered, before moving onto a very detailed description of what can be observed: their wings, bodies, and colour.

Perhaps the most topical question in relation to the butterfly in this period was precisely that of its generation: did it develop from a caterpillar (the Aristotelian tradition)? Was this caterpillar generated from dew (as in the Plinian tradition)? Was the caterpillar dead? And, if so, was this an example of spontaneous generation, the idea that life can generate from non-living matter — a theory that was being called into question by the middle of the century.¹⁵¹ This question preoccupied more recent writing and depictions, which moved away from the idea of spontaneous generation to emphasise that caterpillars and butterflies were the same creature, evident in work by Dutch scientist Jan Swammerdam, which was translated into French.¹⁵² It is notable, then, that the text deals only in brief with the question of generation. While the variety of explanations for butterfly generation is enumerated, we are also shown how the answer is not evident:

There are so many species that it is impossible to say with certainty how they are generated: this is a secret which nature still keeps from us. Some say that butterflies are caterpillars in disguise and that having spun their cocoon, they pierce it and fly off, with patterned wings that match the patterns they had as caterpillars. Others say that butterflies come from

150 On 'observations' see Gianna Pomata, 'Observation Rising: Birth of an Epistemic Genre', in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, ed. by Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 45–80.

151 Arguments for a butterfly's spontaneous generation from a putrefied caterpillar were nuanced in the mid seventeenth century by William Harvey. See 'Introduction', *Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Ohad Nachtomy and Justin E. H. Smith (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–6.

152 Jan Swammerdam, *General History of Insects* (1669) was translated into French from Dutch in 1682: *Histoire générale des insectes... par Jean Swammerdam* (Utrecht: Walcheren, 1682). Johannes Goedaert, painter and naturalist, observed and drew processes of change and insect metamorphosis in his Dutch work of 1660–69, translated into Latin in 1682 and French in 1700. See Brian W. Ogilvie, 'The Order of Insects', *Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Nachtomy and Smith, pp. 222–45 (see pp. 230–36). See also, Eric Jorink, 'Snakes, Fungi and Insects: Otto Marseus van Schrieck, Johannes Swammerdam and the Theory of Spontaneous Generation', in *Zoology in Early Modern Culture: Intersections of Science, Theology, Philology and Political and Religious Education*, ed. by Karl A. E. Enenkel and Paul J. Smith (Brill, 2014), pp. 197–234.

the dew that falls in spring and freezes to the size of a grain of millet on the leaves of certain grasses, before turning into a little worm and then, they claim, a butterfly. But neither of these opinions seems to me to be convincing. (p. 207)

The description then moves away from generation to discuss qualities that can be described with more precision: the butterflies' shape and colour.

The 'Observations' therefore open once more with uncertainty. The focus is on description, not cause. And here too, as in the Chameleon essay, the discussion of what causes their differences in wing colour and pattern is mostly directed towards refuting what others have so far suggested (essentially whether the colours are caused by diet, environment or the colour of the original caterpillar), again using observation to weigh these hypotheses. Most of the attention is then orientated to description, to what can be observed: their eyes, tongues, feet and backs.

Great attention is devoted to wing colour and pattern in a significantly detailed and expansive series of colour descriptions. The heaping up of descriptions here with the notable repetition of approximative colour terms ('jaunâtre' 'grisâtre'; 'yellowish, 'greyish'), of precision ('jaune de fleur de genest' 'orangé vif', 'gris-de-fer'; 'broom flower yellow', 'bright orange', 'iron-grey'), as well as the sheer variety of detail and the quest for exactitude, seem to both demonstrate the capacities, and test the limits, of language to paint a picture, or to be effective in description. As Garrod and others show, in the Renaissance tradition, there was an interplay between the *copia* of language and the *copia* of patterns or species, between the *res* and the *verba* as objects of wonder and delight, and in so doing, natural history writing became a locus for experimenting with descriptive language.¹⁵³ The rhetoric of enumeration and precision can be seen as part of a tradition of natural history writing that dates back to Pliny the Elder in which description is important to demonstrate variety and differentiation. And, as we have seen on numerous occasions in Scudéry's animal writing, variety — whether colour, behaviour, habits, species, or opinion — is celebrated.

153 Garrod, 'Introduction. Knowledge and Literature: The Natural-Historical Description as Epistemic Genre?', in *Natural History in Early Modern France*, pp. 4–10.

With these descriptions, we get an example of practices of science and poetics meeting where visual language is needed to describe a phenomenon. The precise chromatic lexicon used here draws less on traditions of animal descriptions and more on plant and botanical books in which exact colour hues and tones were used to identify species, especially of flowers.¹⁵⁴ Brian Ogilvie argues that natural history books related to botany were less frequently illustrated in the seventeenth century than the sixteenth because of an increasingly sophisticated language of description.¹⁵⁵ Susan Harrow's work on literature and colour has explored this in different terms. She describes the 'aporia' of how colour comes to language, to the black and white medium of print, and examines how language makes space for colour, thinking about the agency and role of colour in exploring the tension between, among others, 'the material and the metaphysical' and 'matter and thought'.¹⁵⁶ Scudéry is, I think, interested not only in colour observation for what it tells us about the natural object but also for its poetic complexities: in the challenges of observational description that colour reveals.

Through such accounts of colour and pattern, these observations strongly emphasise description over cause, such that the enumeration here becomes almost a textual cabinet of curiosities. The effect of which is to emphasise the beauty of the butterfly, its exquisite, sublime form and contrast it with uglier insects. This is very much in keeping with insect descriptions of the period which tended to separate the wonderful (butterflies and bees) from the imperfect or 'lesser' insects, such as the caterpillar.¹⁵⁷ Such emphasis on the butterflies' beauty speaks to the overall thrust of this volume of *Conversations* where wonders and beauties of nature (quinine, lodestones, and the sun) are celebrated

154 C. B. Eriksen and X. Wen, 'Colouring Flowers: Books, Art, and Experiment in the Household of Margery and Henry Power', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 56.1 (2023), pp. 21–43.

155 Brian W. Ogilvie, 'Image and Text in Natural History, 1500–1700', in *The Power of Images in Early Modern Science*, ed. by Wolfgang Lefèvre (Springer, 2003), pp. 141–66. See also Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing*, p. 206.

156 Susan Harrow, *Chromatic Innovation Modern French Poetry and Art Writing* (Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 8, p. 10.

157 See Thomas Moffett, *Theatre of Insects or Lesser Living Creatures* (Cotes, 1658); see Joseph Campana, 'Introduction: Creatures', in *Lesser Living Creatures of the Renaissance, Volume 1: Insects*, ed. by Keith Botelho and Joseph Campana (Penn State University Press, 2023), pp. 1–20 (p. 10).

as examples of God's perfection. The butterfly becomes a beautiful complex example of the intelligent design argument, underpinned by the celebrated skill of Scudéry's evocative descriptive language.

Across these works, Scudéry explores the pleasures of philosophical investigation. Scudéry's 'agreeable' philosophy is embedded in sociability: as we see in these *Conversations*, philosophical investigation creates a way for friends to pass time together, share ideas and think: friendship, exchange, and philosophy are thus intrinsically linked. The art of conversation and the art of philosophy are linked in so far as philosophy is also a manifestation of wit and ingenuity in which the pleasure lies in the dialogue itself.¹⁵⁸ Recent work in the history of science has attended to the blurred boundaries between the natural and artificial that new instruments initiated, and the resulting tensions and anxieties, to the place of wonder, genius, wit, and artistic and mechanical display in what has been described by Garrod as 'cultures of ingenuity'.¹⁵⁹ Scudéry's conversations, anxious about the paradoxical tug between the authority and the limitations of observation, attuned to the poetics of philosophical and observational language, and attentive to wit, wonder, and literary play, can also be approached as part of such cultures. Natural history, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, theology and literature combine here in ways searching and playful. Including Scudéry's work in these 'cultures of ingenuity' not only affirms the methodology that casts Scudéry's interdisciplinary *Conversations* as valuable to them, but also expands our conceptions of such cultures.

* * * * *

Scudéry's *Conversations* are hugely innovative in the way they combine literary and scientific traditions, drawing on wide learning in natural history, natural philosophy, and ancient and Renaissance literature. This present study attempts to emphasise the sheer range and diversity of the traditions Scudéry engages with and the resulting eclecticism, hybridity and excitement of her works in which literary animals,

¹⁵⁸ I am grateful to Raphaële Garrod for her guidance on these points.

¹⁵⁹ Garrod, 'Introduction: Descartes Re-Imagined: Ingenuity before and beyond Dualism', in *Descartes and the Ingenium: the Embodied Soul in Cartesianism*, ed. by Garrod and Marr, p. 13.

mock or burlesque funerals, animal observations, pre-Socratic (and contemporary) atomism, historical fiction, and sociable poetry combine. It is also introductory, acknowledging that further interdisciplinary work needs to be done on these texts and others from her *Conversations*. That very variety of traditions and disciplines is one of Scudéry's great contributions to learning in this period and one of the challenges her works present to scholarly disciplines and canons as have been defined subsequently. I think environmental humanities (and animal studies) and the history of science can speak to each other via work like Scudéry's, and we can include this sort of work in both those disciplines, as they shed different light on it. But to do so, scholars in these fields need to be flexible: we have to acknowledge that, for instance, her animals are at once cultural emblems, embedded in the literary traditions, and objects of science and, in some cases, affective subjects — both literary and real, both 'good to think with' and free from 'the yoke of symbolic service'.¹⁶⁰

These works are a powerful exercise in exploring the nature of enquiry: Scudéry formulates a strong Christian position on the necessary limits of the pursuit of causes, while she also develops an epistemology of observation and variation that is mirrored in her diverse genres and mixed genealogy of traditions. With these *Conversations*, she explores *how* to represent knowledge. By deliberately blending genres and traditions, her experimental 'scientific' writing also upturns early modern — and perhaps even modern — hierarchies of genre and learning. Most significantly, then, I think we can approach Scudéry's hybrid genres and traditions as an intervention in method: she demonstrates and provokes in her readers what Anne-Lise Rey describes in a different context as 'epistemic mobility'.¹⁶¹ Not only does Scudéry make it possible to see things differently through her multivocal dialogues and her hybrid genres, but in so doing she is suggesting the possibility of that mobility, of the imagination. While she subscribes limits to what we can know perfectly, she also seems to suggest a liberating plurality of ways of knowing.

160 Laurie Shannon, 'not all textual animals labor equally under the yoke of human symbolic service', *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmology in Shakespearean Locales* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 5.

161 Anne-Lise Rey, 'Method and Explanation', in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Shapiro and Detlefsen, pp. 164–74 (p. 169).

II. TRANSLATIONS

Approaches to Translation

This translation originated as teaching material: I translated 'The Story of Two Chameleons' to teach it on 'Green Matters in Modern Languages and Cultures', a final-year module at the University of Exeter. This is a team-taught module that cuts across language departments (and so the texts are offered in their original language and in English) and my translation was intended to introduce students, who may not have studied French or French culture, to this work. I have therefore attempted to produce a text that is accessible to undergraduate students as well as to scholars outside French Studies, and to offer an introduction that will speak to specialists as well as those new to this material and context.

I have tried to maintain the style of Scudéry's text, in relation to word order, repetition, lexicon, syntax and a certain formality of tone, while also trying to render it in readable English. For classical names, such as Democritus, I use English spelling, but 'Ariamene' and 'Artabase' I have retained to convey the sense of fictionalisation; French names are kept in their French spelling. I have followed the line order for the verse translations but not reproduced the rhymes, metre or attended to versification, preferring clarity of meaning. There are rarely paragraphs in the first editions, so I have added them for clarity. I have retained Scudéry's repetitions, particularly the frequent 'he said', 'she added' etc. that punctuate the dialogue, often mid speech, to keep the focus on the oral quality of the conversations.

There are some challenges to translating early modern texts, one of which is the use of terms that have a particular cultural valency in this period and for which it is difficult to find an equivalent in English, such as 'galanterie', 'honnête homme', 'libertinage', 'tendre'. Rather than keep them in French, I have found close English words, 'gallantry', 'a respectable man', 'libertinage', 'tender', and have included notes explaining the French specificity. Sharon Nell has provided an extremely useful appendix of seventeenth-century terms in her translation of the Lucretius and Brutus stories from Scudéry's

Clélie and I also refer readers to this.¹ Other frequently used terms, such as ‘esprit’, which can mean mind, intelligence, or wit, I have translated according to the context and given a note if needed.

Other challenges were specific to these works: I have chosen to translate ‘vraisemblance’, a key term for both Scudéry’s discussions of natural philosophy and her poetics, as discussed in the Introduction, as ‘plausible.’ In so doing, I follow Ian Maclean’s translation of ‘vraisemblance’ in Descartes’s *Discours* and follow critical usage of the discussion of this concept in the philosophy and poetics of the period.² It is imperfect, however, as it loses the presence of ‘true/truth’ as a stem word (but ‘verisimilitude’/ ‘verisimilar’ is too technical in register, and a neologism like ‘true-seeming’ jars for being unusual); another appropriate word, with historical pertinence, might have been ‘probable’ (often defined as ‘vraisemblable’ in the dictionaries of the time).³ I have translated ‘dames’ as ladies and ‘femmes’ as women to honour the distinction Scudéry makes, in keeping with other approaches to translating her work.⁴ Like Karen Newman in her translation of *The Story of Sapho*, I have translated the ‘Histoire’ of the title of the Two Chameleons as ‘Story’, although in French it also means ‘History’; I discuss the significance of genre in the Introduction.⁵ I decided to use animate pronouns (he/she), rather

1 Madeleine de Scudéry, *Lucrece and Brutus: Glory in the Land of Tender*, ed. and trans. by Sharon Diane Nell (Iter Press, 2021), pp. 309–28.

2 See Ian Maclean, *A Discourse on the Method: Of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2008), in his note on ‘vraisemblance’ as ‘plausible’: ‘Descartes tries to rid himself of the middle category of merely plausible propositions, those described by the Latin terms *probabiles* (i.e. being approved of by the wisest in a given area, or being derived from a textual authority) and *versimiles* (i.e. that which can plausibly be derived from the evidence of the senses)’ (p. 129). Emma Gilby uses ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘verisimilar’ in her discussions of *vraisemblance* in the philosophy and poetics of Descartes and his contemporaries but also uses the term ‘plausible’ — as in ‘to be plausible or verisimilar (‘vraisemblable’)’ in *Descartes’s Fictions: Reading Philosophy with Poetics* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 6. See also the discussion by Raphaële Garrod of the relation of the ‘plausible’ to dialectic in *Cosmographical Novelties in French Renaissance Prose (1550–1630): Dialectic and Discovery* (Brepols, 2016), p. 57, p. 64.

3 Cotgrave defines ‘vraisemblance’ as ‘has the appearance of truth’, or ‘probableness’ and ‘likenesse of truth’ and ‘vraisemblable’ as ‘Probable, likelie, like or seeming to be true’. Furetière says of ‘vraisemblable’: ‘caractere ou apparence de verité’ [characteristic or appearance of truth]; the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* gives, for ‘probable’, ‘qui a apparence de verité’, and for ‘probabilité’: ‘Vray-semblance, apparence de verité’, as does Furetière.

4 Madeleine de Scudéry, *The Story of Sapho*, ed. and trans. by Karen Newman (Chicago University Press, 2003).

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

than 'it', for the animals, using the appropriate gender when they are characterised and sexed (as 'pets'), and following grammatical gender for other animals (e.g. in the long Chameleon poem), although the animate/inanimate pronoun distinction is not evident in French grammar. My concern was that this might offer more empathy than intended; however, on balance, I judged that the depiction of the chameleons, hen-pigeons, turtledoves, and, by extension, other literary animals, merited an animate pronoun as 'it' conveyed too much distance, even though, as I discuss in relation to the chameleons, they occupy an ambiguous status between subjects and objects.

I have included notes to clarify some references and context, but have kept these brief on the assumption that these translations will be read with the accompanying detailed Introduction. Any marginal notes in the original material are also recorded in the footnotes. I have made extensive use of historical dictionaries (in particular the subscriber-only *Classiques Garnier Grand Corpus des Dictionnaires* database, as well as the freely available historical *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* and the CNTRL database) and have documented this in the notes to explain translation choices. I am grateful to Open Book's readers for their advice on this translation, and am particularly indebted to Tom Hinton and Hugh Roberts, for so generously taking the time to help me with queries and puzzles, and to David Sergeant, for his ability to find the best words in English.

I used the following editions:

'De l'Incertitude', in *Conversations morales*, 2 vols (Paris: Guillain: 1686), I, pp. 365–496. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k109792p>

'Histoire de deux caméléons', in *Nouvelles Conversations de morale*, 2 vols (Paris: Vve de Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688), II, pp. 496–629. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k109797k?rk=42918;4>

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 'Conrart' 5420.1 and 5420.2.
<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc89222f/ca19942137>;
<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc89222f/ca19942136>.

La Rochelle, Bibliothèque de La Rochelle, MS Tallemant des Réaux 673, edition used: *Le Manuscrit 673 de Tallemant des Réaux*, ed. by Vincenette Maigne (Klincksieck, 1994).

'Histoire du Prince Ariamene' and 'Des Papillons', which includes 'Observations sur des Papillons', in *Entretiens de morale*, 2 vols (Paris: Anisson, 1692), II, pp. 95–295, pp. 296–333. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k828369?rk=42918;4>

‘On Uncertainty’

Three infinitely amiable ladies and one of their male friends, having resolved to spend the day together,¹ were for some time in amicable disagreement: should they go to the *Comédie Italienne*, the Opera, or for a promenade?² In the end, the latter won out over the other pleasures. Amalthée, at whose home this friendly debate was taking place, ordered the horses and carriage to be made ready. However, just as the ladies were preparing to go down to get into the carriage, one of them, Amerinte, turned to the other two with a smile and said in an infinitely amiable manner:

“But is it certain that we want to promenade? For as we have in our company two friends who profess uncertainty, it seems to me that I have reason to ask.”

“For my part,” replied Amalthée, “I have decided not to return to Paris unless I have promenaded until nightfall.”

Isidore added, “Although you reproach me for being uncertain, I agree to the promenade.”

“As for me,” said Timandre, laughing, “even if I were not keen, I would force myself to come along for an uncertain friend as pleasant as Isidore.”

1 I have followed the text and translated ‘dames’ as ladies and ‘femmes’ as women to retain the distinction. I have translated ‘Incertitude’ of the title as ‘Uncertainty’ rather than ‘incertitude’, to match the substantive ‘incertains’ and to use a term that has a broader range of meanings, as the French term does, and is more familiar in English.

2 The ‘promenade’ refers to the often tree-lined avenues for carriages that were developed in seventeenth-century Paris and to the activity of taking a leisurely public walk or carriage ride. Taking a carriage along the promenade was a fashionable social activity — Elizabeth Kugler compares the promenades to places of spectacle and social performance as the wealthy could show off their carriages and attire, the aspirational could momentarily transcend social barriers and Parisians could move across the city in new ways. See Elizabeth Kugler, ‘Spectacular Sights: The Promenades of Seventeenth-Century Paris’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 39.3 (1999), pp. 38–46.

"But we should decide on where we are going," replied the beautiful and wise Amalthée.

"You are right," said Amerinte, "but it is up to the two uncertain ones to agree on it."

"Do not speak for me," replied Timandre, "for I renounce my own uncertainty for the whole day, and will follow only that of Isidore."

"It is therefore up to you," said Amerinte, looking at Isidore, "to decide where we should go; but I ask kindly that you do not choose the Cours,³ especially at this time of day, for I would like mix conversation with our promenade, and the Cours hardly permits this."

"You are right," said Isidore; then she added quickly, "there is, however, enough pleasure to be had if you are in an idle mood in taking a trip in a carriage without constant talking; others can talk away but you do not need to listen to them; and you can amuse yourself by looking out the window, letting your imagination wander and dream of far off things."

"In that case," replied Amalthée, "should we go to the Grenelle plain or the Bois de Vincennes?"⁴

"Perhaps neither," replied Isidore. "I really liked Vincennes before the trees were cut back: but by the time there is enough shade again for my taste, I will no longer be in a fit state to promenade; and as for the Grenelle plain, I only find it pleasant when there are military parades."

"Then why don't you choose one of the beautiful residences just outside Paris," suggested Amalthée, "because we have more freedom there than in the Tuileries and or even than at Rambouillet."⁵

3 The Cours here refers to the 'Cours-la-Reine', a promenade that went from the Tuileries to what is now the Place du Canada (and which still exists in Paris today): this was opened by Marie de Medici in 1618 and, according to contemporary accounts, was extremely popular. See Kugler, p. 39. It is notably that the group of friends choose a less public route and end up in a closed, private space for their conversation, as discussed below.

4 The Grenelle Plain was a large expanse of land situated West of Paris (in what is now the 7th and 15th *arrondissements*): Louis XIV had the Hôtel des Invalides built here in 1674 for veterans; the Grenelle plain was used for military training and ceremonious troop inspections or parades ('revues' in French). The Bois de Vincennes, East of Paris (now bordering the 12th *arrondissement*) was a large, forested park; the Chateau de Vincennes was a principal royal residence, substantially rebuilt and expanded by Louis XIV when he made it his primary home in the 1650s.

5 The Tuileries refers to the Tuileries Garden in Paris, the large formal Royal gardens of the Louvre Palace: they were opened to the public from 1667 (but members of the nobility had some access before this). Rambouillet refers to the Rambouillet

"Indeed, you are not wrong about that," said Isidore. "In such places you always encounter acquaintances that you have no interest in. But without deciding anything," she added, "let's get into my carriage and leave yours here; my coachman knows all the delightful spots around Paris — we just need to ask him to choose one and to keep going until we find somewhere we like enough to alight. But whether we stop or not, I beg you to give me the freedom to daydream."

"We will," said Amalthée, "but please oblige us by not daydreaming too often since your conversation is always so agreeable."

"That is very well said," replied Timandre. "There is no uncertainty when it comes to praising the beautiful Isidore."

It was therefore resolved to let chance dictate the journey.

Amerinte and Amalthée sat in the back of the carriage, with Isidore and Timandre at the front. The coachman was ordered to go wherever he thought would be most pleasant.

"From what I can see," said Amerinte, "chance has placed us well since Amalthée and I, both enemies of all uncertainty, find ourselves seated near to each other; and Isidore and Timandre, who often say that everything is doubtful and uncertain, find themselves opposite us."

"It's true," said Timandre, seeing that Isidore did not reply, "that our seating is appropriate; but if I were alone in supporting the side of uncertainty, I would soon be beaten."

"And yet it is so easy to support it," said Isidore with a nonchalant air. "But perhaps it is a little bold to do so. Uncertainty is not something voluntary because it is in some ways a necessity. As soon as you decide to use your reason, and to apply yourself to looking at things closely in themselves, you discover that what you think you believe with the most certainty you actually believe very doubtfully;⁶ and that in the conduct of life you are led by blind inclination or a habit you follow out of idleness, without knowing why. If you gave yourself the pain of examining your own heart, you would not know what decision to make."

"That is so well said," replied Timandre, "that as uncertain as I am, I

Residence situated between the Louvre and the Tuileries Palaces: it was the home of Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet and from 1620–48 she hosted a well-known literary salon, called the *Chambre bleue*.

6 Scudéry uses 'douteusement' as an adverb, and I have retained this in English even if it is slightly awkward.

agree with Isidore without fearing I am mistaken."

"Careful!" she exclaimed pleasantly, smiling. "For that would go against our principles, which do not allow us to be too sure of our own feelings."

"Ah! My dear Isidore," interrupted Amalthée, "you make me fearful: what you *do* trust if not your own reason or that of someone you have chosen as a close friend, like Timandre?"

"I assure you," Isidore replied, "that I do not choose anything and that my friendship with Timandre depends only on our common feelings. If that agreement should cease," she added, laughing, "our friendship might well cease too and this means I never end the letters that I write with the very ordinary declaration of 'yours forever faithfully':⁷ for although I have still not lived enough to have had much experience of the uncertainty of the human heart, I agree with an old Spanish expression which says:

De la cosas mas seguras la mas Segura es dudar
[Of all the most secure things, the most secure is to doubt]

"It is true," added Timandre, "that of the surest things, the surest is to doubt, as your Spaniard says, for the one who does not make a decision is never wrong."

"But," replied Amalthée, "are you not mistaken if you doubt something certain?"

"But what do you base your certainty on?" asked Isidore. "We cannot judge anything except by our senses and our senses deceive us every day in the most ordinary of things. For example: the colours of the rainbow that I find so beautiful or the pleasant hues on a pigeon's neck are not actual colours, according to what Timandre has led me to understand. The far-off hills that we can see from here," she added, "seem to be clouds to us; an oar in the water seems bent though it is straight: beautiful sights deceive us. How then, since we cannot be sure of our own eyes, can we be sure of our so-called reason, so easily seduced by the imagination and blinded by passion? It is for these reasons that I give myself over to uncertainty, without, of course, strongly binding myself to anything."

7 The French literally reads here 'I never end my letters with the claim of being for my whole life what I am': I have clarified this in my translation.

"For me," said Amalthée, "I thoroughly disagree with your feelings: for I would think myself mad, and indeed I would become so, if I were not sure of anything. Of all the states in which to find yourself, uncertainty is the cruellest: this is so true that hope holds nothing sweet for me because it is always accompanied by some uncertainty."

"I agree with Amalthée," interjected Amerinte, "and a certain misfortune would give me less pain I think than a misfortune that I thought might always be about to happen, without being sure that I could guard against it, although it might be possible to do so."

"But were the uncertainty of the mind," replied Amalthée, "to have no other fault than being the cause of unbalanced moods and other bizarre behaviour by those who possess such a tendency, I still would not be able to bear it. We all know a man whose uncertainty of heart and mind made him ridiculous. Those who knew him when he was young say that as soon as he started to appear in public, he thought that to distinguish himself and to show off his superior wit, he had to free himself from his rightful duties and follow his inclination in everything. Doubting anything that might restrain him, he lived chaotically, according to his changeable moods, looking everywhere for pleasure and only finding it to be unsatisfactory everywhere he looked."

Timandre replied, "It is true that Melicrate, whom I recognise from this description, was just as you describe him. But not all those who are uncertain are like him; and just because we are not blindly sure of everything as you are, does not mean we also swing from black to white like Melicrate — who, after his period of doubting everything became suddenly devout to the point of superstition, and took on an air so austere and became such a savage and harsh censor of everyone that a Chartreux monk was more sociable than he was."

Amalthée replied, "Although I never love extremity in anything, because he lived in such turmoil, I would have pardoned his austere retreat if he had remained thus. However, because of the very same uncertainty that you adhere to, his religious devotion waned, and having become a libertine believer, he became for some time a devout hypocrite, initially not daring to go back on his word. I have been told that in the province where he retreated, he returned to the libertine ways of his youth. However, luckily for him, a terrible illness killed him and prompted repentance, when I am not sure: judge then whether

uncertainty is not dangerous for this life and the next."

As Amalthée finished speaking, their carriage broke down at the end of a pleasant road leading to the delightful house of the wise and learned Aristene, whom these four people knew well. Although they were obliged to descend, they were pleased that this chance event had taken place in a location where the carriage could be repaired.⁸ They went, therefore, along this pleasant road. Keeping with the subject in hand, Amalthée asked Isidore and Timandre whether they wanted Aristene to judge their disagreement.

"Ah, Amalthée," replied Isidore smiling, "people who doubt almost everything do not wish to be judged on any matter; but we will talk about anything that pleases you, for the uncertain are not the greatest enemies of complaisance."

"I agree with what the beautiful Isidore says," said Timandre, "for to be truly complaisant, you should never attach yourself to anything: this is why the uncertain are not stubborn as often as other people."

"And yet, you support your uncertainty stubbornly," said Amerinte.

Just as Isidore was about to comment, the large door opened and Aristene appeared at the top of the magnificent outdoor staircase: recognising them, he received them with much civility and joy, welcoming them first into a large entry hall and then into a pretty room. Isidore described the misfortune that had befallen their carriage; Aristene asked his servants to attend to it, and then invited the group to sit down with him, while they waited for the heat of the day to subside to allow them to continue their promenade more comfortably. Since Amalthée wanted to try to cure Isidore of her uncertainty, thinking it dangerous, she took this opportunity to tell Aristene that they had had a disagreement on their journey and had chosen him as judge.

"I agree," said Isidore, "but on one condition," she continued turning agreeably to Aristene, "if you do not manage to persuade me, you will permit me to remain in the state of uncertainty that I cannot help but find myself in and which Timandre, at least, does not condemn. I hope

8 'chance event': the French gives 'accident'. See the definition of 'accident' in Furetière as 'un coup de fortune' [stroke of fate] and the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*: 'Cas fortuit, ce qui arrive par hazard' ['chance occurrence, something that happens by chance']. Retaining 'accident' in English here would be misleading. See also Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, p. 309.

that as enlightened and learned as you are, you will confess that you believe in good faith many things very doubtfully."

"I agree willingly," said Aristene, "that by the weakness of the human spirit and through my own lack of insight, there are many things that I do not know or that I know by conjecture alone; but I affirm that universal uncertainty is a failing that can lead to the greatest of crimes."

"It would seem," said Isidore looking at Timandre, "that in looking for a fair judge we have found a redoubtable enemy. But it doesn't matter," she added, "let us not refuse to support our own sentiments on the matter."

"As for me, Madame," said Timandre laughing, "I would not be able to act otherwise even if I wished to. For having always blamed the one who, in suffering unbelievable pain, cried that suffer as he might, he would never confess that what he felt was pain, I have no desire to abandon the cause of uncertainty which on the contrary affords me no pain at all."

"I entreat you," said Isidore to Aristene, "do not imagine that I wish to mix religion within the uncertainty that I defend: I do not take it that far. I only claim to take uncertainty as far as human reason can go and I only apply it to natural knowledge, daily conduct, passions, vices and virtues."

"Oh, Madame," replied Aristene, "even in the state that you represent it, uncertainty places the uncertain in great peril: for it is very difficult to place boundaries on uncertainty. It is like an ignorant, audacious woman, who when saying that she does not make a decision about anything, tacitly makes a decision about everything, since she claims to not believe anything at all that she cannot know perfectly. In a word, Madame, uncertainty, to speak plainly, is the first foundation of atheism: all the libertines in the world would agree on this if they were sincere. And you would not find one who dared to state that he had convincing proof of his atheism, such that he would be compelled instead to confess that it is but a simple doubt which has made him deny reason, faith, and religion; that it is doubt alone which has caused him to abandon himself to the unruliness of his passions. Nothing is more terrible than seeing someone upturn everything that is most sacred to religion on the basis of a simple and an ill-founded doubt, or the fact that an ignorant libertine considers all the martyrs and all the great men of the Church to

be idiots. For I will say it again: doubt alone is the cause of libertinage, and the pinnacle of human folly is to want to believe only that which can be perfectly understood.”⁹

“I have already told you,” said Isidore, “that I do not claim to extend uncertainty as far as religion: I only apply it to that which lies within the jurisdiction of natural reason.”

“I agree with the beautiful Isidore,” added Timandre, “and to talk about the uncertainty we mean, we must respectfully leave faith to one side as it does not concern it. Instead, we should transport ourselves, if one must say it in this way, to the time of the gods and the infancy of the world — if one can speak thus.”

“I consent to that,” said Aristene. “But you will see that in starting to talk about uncertainty, in whatever way you please, you will always find yourself at the cliff edge I’ve already mentioned; nevertheless, I am prepared to follow your lead.”

“Given this,” said Isidore, smiling, “will you not allow me to doubt for some time, or even forever, the love and friendship it is said to be felt for me?”

“Regarding love,” replied Aristene, “since I am no longer young enough to take an interest in this, I think that ladies are right not to believe lightly what people say to them on this matter; for since the wisest philosopher of the ancient world said ‘beauty is short-lived tyranny’,¹⁰ ladies are permitted to be uncertain about the constancy and sincerity of their lovers.”

“I believe this more than Isidore does,” said Amalthée, “for love is a most uncertain passion.”

“I agree,” said Amerinte. “But I might add that in friendship nothing is more irritating than a suspicious friend: I think I would prefer a magnanimous enemy to a friend like that.”

“And yet,” said Isidore, “it is quite dangerous to let oneself be

9 ‘Libertinage’: in this period ‘libertinage’ was associated with free-thinking (and, as here, possibly atheism), and an exercise of personal freedom that might include a debauched or hedonistic way of life and its expression in literature, particularly poetry. The term originated as an insult ‘by Catholics and Protestant apologists alike to stigmatize doctrinal and behavioural deviancy’, as Isabelle Moreau explains in ‘Sceptics and Free-thinkers’, in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, ed. by Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 110–23 (p. 110).

10 This saying is attributed to Socrates.

deceived by appearances: a small amount of uncertainty is often a great help in aiding us to understand the depths of the hearts of those who seem to be friendly."

"For me," said Aristene, "given that I do not wish for uncertainty in any matter, but seek prudence everywhere, I agree that you should not give your heart thoughtlessly to those who say they are friends. Of course, you need to take the time to get to know them so as not to be fooled by simple appearances. But after reason and experience have persuaded you that a friend is sincere, virtuous, and tender, you must then let any suspicions go and trust in this wise friendship — for friendship is certainly the greatest and most salient benefit of the lives of reasonable people."¹¹

"But this great benefit that you talk about," replied Timandre, "has not universally been recognised as such by the most learned of antiquity. There was as much diversity in their opinions as there were philosophers: some placed most highly health, others wealth, or learning, or virtue (even without defining it clearly); others still suggested pleasure, and those who were uncertain promoted the tranquillity of the soul, which they claimed they could not establish without doubting almost everything."

"That word 'almost,'" said Aristene, "is well placed, and it would be very dangerous to not use it."

"You already go too far," said Isidore. "I simply ask whether it is possible to be able to recognise virtues clearly: for example, I know a man who seems to be generous among those who do not know him as well as I do; and yet he never gives anything away without a hidden self-interest. This allows me to advance boldly that he never shows generosity that is not in fact motivated by greed."

"There are many people like this in the world," replied Amalthée. "But that is no reason to doubt in general whether generosity exists."

11 Scudéry's elaborates a theory of 'tender friendship' across her writing, in particular in her *Carte de Tendre*, a map of an imaginary land used to represent the route towards perfect tender love. It is included in Scudéry's novel, *Clélie*, and relays a non-sexual relationship based on respect rather than passion, that values constancy, patience, and fidelity. Scudéry was known as the 'Reine de Tendre', which is translated by Scudéry scholars as the 'Queen of Tender', a term we will see used in the manuscript poems in this volume. For recent further discussion, see Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, pp. 19–24.

And according to your principles," she added laughing, "you must doubt vices as well as virtues so that when you see a greedy old man who only wants to amass treasures which he will have no time to enjoy, you doubt his greed."

"I may well doubt this too," Isidore replied. "But I confess quite openly that I doubt virtues a little more than vices."

"This is not one of our principles," remarked Timandre, "as perfect doubt is not sure of anything."

"But your perfect doubt," replied Amerinte smiling, "is the most imperfect thing in the world: for what, therefore, is the purpose of human reason and knowledge?"

"To make known," said Timandre, "that one knows everything that one knows very doubtfully and that a great art of conjecture is the most solid foundation for most of the knowledge that men think they possess."

"As I've already said to you," replied Aristene, "you will find yourself once again at the cliff edge I mentioned at the outset if you take that route. If you only ever wish to believe that which you can know perfectly through your reason alone, you will truly be a Pyrrhonian philosopher who will doubt others and even yourself, as well as the past, present and future, the heavens as well as the earth."¹²

"I have read many works", said Amalthée, "of the learned La Mothe le Vayer, and if my memory serves, he was not an enemy of this school."¹³

"This is true," replied Amerinte. "But he imposed limits on it, and he did not always speak doubtfully. For instance, when he spoke against

12 Pyrrhonism is an ancient Greek philosophical school of scepticism which advocates suspension of judgement. It is said to have been influenced by the teachings of Pyrrho and Timon of Philius in the fourth century BCE: the ancient school of thought is best known through the writings of Sextus Empiricus from the late second century CE (see the discussion in the Introduction for the sixteenth and seventeenth century interest in Sextus's work and scepticism more widely).

13 François de La Mothe Le Vayer (1588–1672) was a French writer associated with scepticism (the 'school' mentioned here), and significant in disseminating ideas from Sextus Empiricus, in particular in his *Jugement sur les anciens et principaux historiens grecs et latins* (Courbé, 1646); *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a en histoire* (Billaine, 1668); and sceptical *Dialogues*, published under the pseudonym of Orasius Tubero [1630] (Savius, 1716). He also was critical of Pyrrho in *De la vertu des payens* (1642), stressing the incompatibility between Christianity and Pyrrhonism. For an overview, see the chapters on 'Pyrrhonism' by John O'Brien and Moreau, 'Sceptics and Free-thinkers', in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, ed. by Moriarty and Jennings, pp. 62–66, 110–23.

that philosophy, which is described as both ancient and renewed, and which posits that the heavens and earth are composed of atoms, he advanced very strongly that he would as willingly believe that Homer's *Iliad* or the most beautiful tragedies by Seneca were composed of an infinite number of letters of the alphabet mixed in a bag and scattered at random as think that atoms could have made our world in all its beauty."¹⁴

"That opinion," said Aristene, "was also that of two excellent men who came before him and is certainly right."¹⁵

"As for me," replied Amalthée, "I read those comments with pleasure, for even I," she added smiling, "have heard so much talk about atoms recently from a very virtuous and learned friend of mine, who, having become interested in atoms, spread this enthusiasm among his friends and mine such that for a time atoms were all they talked about, for they refused to discuss anything else, which I often found tiresome. I remember one day," she added, "when we were at the home of a woman of great quality, admirable wit, and unparalleled politeness, our hostess undertook to pick a gentle quarrel with him on this subject, thinking that this philosophy was a little dangerous. Since those who found themselves at her home wanted to please her, the conversation became very pleasant, for we were not speaking as philosophers and the discussion moved on. There was even some impromptu poetry composed on the topic which was rather delightful."

"I entreat you," said Isidore, "please share some of these poems with us — I have heard about them elsewhere and you have always had such a fine memory. Since I am not an enemy of atoms, although it is not for me to know them well, it would be a pleasure to hear you talk about them. This would not displease Timandre either, since before becoming fully uncertain, he travelled a little in the country of atoms."

"I confess," replied Timandre, "that atoms did entertain me, but I wasn't fully persuaded by them: however, it gives me pleasure to agree that your curiosity should be satisfied."

"My memory," said Amalthée, "may not be as reliable as you believe.

14 A similar argument was used by La Mothe Le Vayer in his educational text *Physique du Prince* (Courbé, 1658). Lucretius often compares atoms and letters in his atomist *De Rerum Natura*.

15 This argument also features in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, 2.93–94.

But at the risk of remembering incorrectly, I will tell you that there were several ladies in this group and four or five men. I will only name Lysis, whom one normally attacked for his atomism; and since we thought that this philosophy had cured him of his feelings towards one of the ladies present, a man in the group recited this madrigal, addressing it to that same lady:

*For the meagre charms of a futile science
An unfaithful lover has just broken free of his chains,
And no longer sighs for you,
He contemplates, in peace, heaven, earth and seas,
And charmed by the springs which make the world move,
He forgets his sweetest moments for the sake of reason.
Aimable Iris, your heart repines,
Forgive him his changes,
What pleasure to have as a lover
The lover of all nature?*

And then, a man in the group, who had dashed off another madrigal while that one was being recited, exclaimed, 'I want to recite one too', and this is what he said, with a playful air:

*The learned men are inconsistent; we must be wary:
Trivial atoms fill their spirits,
And once charmed by their philosophy
They no longer love Climene or Clovis.
They create instead many phantoms,
They are also subject to a thousand changes
As they are lovers of atoms,
They are also atoms of lovers.*

"This notion," continued Amalthée, "made the whole gathering laugh, but annoyed Lysis a little, who did not want to compose poetry himself; but one of my close friends who composed poetry with marvellous ease and fluency whenever he wanted to, made Lysis speak despite himself, by attributing to him the gallant and humorous madrigal I will recite now:¹⁶

16 'Gallant': I have translated 'galant' and 'galanterie' as 'gallant' and 'gallantry'. This term had a particular cultural meaning in this period as an aesthetic term,

*Since I gave my mind to atoms,
I disdain greatness, crowns and kingdoms,
All these vast objects are small in my eyes.
I share my life with the most noble of cares
And by breathing I create the air, the earth and the heavens;
But if I must confess, my dear Sylvie:
When I adored you, I did much better."*

"This madrigal is very pretty," said Isidore, "but are there any others? I am not so against atoms that I cannot bear poems as ingenious as this one."

"In that case," Amalthée replied, "this same friend I mentioned wrote another one for a distinguished man at the gathering, who seemed to want to follow Lysis in his feelings. Here it is:

*I embrace Philosophy
I listen to her, I entrust myself to her,
She hardens my heart to even the sweetest charms,
She is a severe mistress
But beautiful Philis, between us,
Aren't you more so?"*

"All this is very pleasant," replied Isidore, "but did the man who made the others speak not speak for himself?"

"He certainly did," responded Amalthée, "because the principal lady of the group ordered him to and he obeyed in these terms: for in these sorts of witty and playful conversations, gallant expressions are allowed, and besides, the aim of the man I was talking about was to make it clear that he did not belong to the atomist school. Here, therefore, is the madrigal he recited, smiling as he turned to the lady who had asked him to speak for himself:

*The thousand atoms of fire which spark out of your eyes,
Have reduced, beautiful Iris, my whole heart into atoms,
From so terrible and prodigious an effect,*

connoting a sort of literary writing associated with a focus on sentiment, with playfulness, and with 'modern', rather than ancient genres; it also referred to a code of courteous behaviour, particularly of men towards women. For a full discussion, see Alain Viala, *La France galante: essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

*Descartes or Lysis would compose four mighty tomes,
I who am but an atom amongst these great scholars,
Without being able to explain it, I feel it like any other;
But, in a word, Iris, if I had a thousand hearts,
I would offer them all to pay for a single atom of yours."*

"If atoms," replied Isidore, "had caused these sorts of madrigals alone, then it would have been a shame if no-one had spoken about them."

"As for atoms," said Aristene, "I agree to seeing them as the cause of these pleasant and witty madrigals and of thousands of other delicate light-hearted trifles that come to us easily; but try to persuade me that I am made of atoms and I will not believe it."

"You are right," said Amerinte, "for even though I have a beautiful and clever female friend to whom a disciple of the famous Rohaut taught this philosophy, despite my advice, I have never been able to conceive that atoms, by knocking into each other, were able to form an infinite number of things in so ordered a way, either in heaven or on earth.¹⁷ And were a conversation about philosophy appropriate for ladies, I would be happy to listen to Aristene talk about atoms, to better equip me to argue with the friend I've mentioned, who is learning, despite my advice, about this fashionable philosophy of atoms. I have, however," she added agreeably, "a little moral quandary relating to a friendship about which I wanted to consult you: to be best placed to judge it, you need to know, since you have never met the illustrious niece of this famous philosopher who in our century resuscitated atoms — if one can describe it thus — I hold her wit, her heart, and her virtue in the esteem that she deserves and offer her all the friendship of which I am capable.¹⁸ What pleases me infinitely about this illustrious lady is that although she knows everything that a person of her sex can know and she writes with a gallant and polite turn of phrase, in both verse and prose, and her nobility equals her wit, she retains a modesty which augments all these other good qualities. I therefore ask the wise Aristene whether I am in some way to blame if I ask her to speak against the sentiments of a man

17 Jacques Rohault (1618–72), educator, mathematician, Cartesian, supported a mechanical philosophy that proposed that atoms underpinned physical things in his *Traité de Physique* (Cusson, 1671).

18 Catherine Descartes (1637–1706) was a friend and correspondent of Madeleine de Scudéry, whom Scudéry sometimes calls by her salon-name, Cartésie.

whose memory is and must be very precious to her."

"It is easy," replied Aristene, "to reply to your two objections: to start with the second one, know my dear Amerinte that some philosophers are like lawyers: while they are making a plea they speak with conviction to convey their feelings, sometimes they even argue, but after the pleas have been heard they praise each other, embrace, and are friends as before. So, your friend would not be as you describe her if she thought it was a problem for you to hold a different view to her relative. And to reply to your first scruple, I agree that in our time a lady who is too much a philosopher is not a character one should adopt: but ladies with great wit can know everything without overstepping the decorum of their sex, and have all the more reason to listen to others speak. We see that in antiquity there were many women well known for their learning. Axiothéa, from the Peloponnese, having read some books by Plato, was so charmed by them that she went dressed as a man to listen to Plato himself and for a long time went unnoticed among these philosophers, as Achilles did amongst Lycomedes's daughters."¹⁹

"Indeed it was so," Timandre said, "according to Themistius. There was also a famous gentlewoman called Lasthenia, who learnt philosophy without using a disguise."²⁰

"Yes," said Aristene, "and she fell in love with one of Plato's relatives, who was also his disciple: this passion was stronger than her philosophy. But there was also a more prudent woman, Arria, who went with her husband, Albinus, to listen to Plato: Diogenes Laertius dedicated his book of the *Lives of Philosophers* to her, as we learn from a passage from the 'Life of Plato'.²¹ But amongst all the women from distant history who applied themselves to philosophy, the most famous was the daughter of

19 Axiothea of Phlius (c. 350 BCE): a female student of Plato who is said to have dressed as a man to attend Plato's academy, as told by Themistius (317–88 CE) who was primarily a scholar of Aristotle; his works in Latin, *Themistii Orationes*, had been published in Paris by Mabre-Cramoisy in 1684. The reference to Achilles and the daughters of Lycomedes is an allusion to the mythological episode when this Greek hero was disguised as a woman on Skyros by King Lycomedes at the request of his mother, Thetis, to prevent him joining the battle at Troy.

20 Lasthenia of Matinea was another of Plato's female students, said to have had a relationship with his nephew Speusippus (see Diogenes Laertius, 'Speusippus', IV.1.2).

21 Arria was a philosopher and Platonist from the second century CE and possibly the woman to whom Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* is addressed (see 'Life of Plato', 3. 47.29).

the excellent mathematician of Alexandria, Theon: her name is Hypatia.²² He taught her the highest forms of learning of his own discipline and she far surpassed her father. She was beautiful, modest, and virtuous but her greatest glory was that Synesius, who from a pagan philosopher became one of the greatest lights of the Church, was her disciple and considered it an honour to be so.”

“And to add to the glory of your sex,” said Aristene looking at Amalthée and Amerinte, “the women I have mentioned, as well as many others I haven’t named, chose the philosophy that taught that there is one god, by following that of Plato. I could,” he added, “list for you a significant number of learned ladies in all subsequent centuries and across all nations, but I have limited myself to naming those from the time of the pagan philosophy from which atoms are descended; and I have said nothing of the illustrious Athenais, or of the hundreds of others who have honoured their sex across time, or even of those who still do so today.”²³

“But since so many famous women,” said Amerinte, “wanted to know philosophy, there can be no great wrong in us hearing a little more about it from the wise Aristene, in order to prevent Isidore’s uncertainty from resolving itself in favour of the atoms she hears about every day from the teacher of my female friend, who is also friends with her. For I say yet again that I have never believed atoms made all the wonders that the world is composed of: with all their chance occurrences, they could not know, for instance, how to make a straight route through our forests, since of all those forests discovered in the New World, of which I have read a description, only forests without any paths have been found.”

“But,” replied Timandre, “this intelligent being,²⁴ as powerful and eternal as we must believe him to be, he who has created everything, has not done any more in this respect than the atoms.”

22 Hypatia (350–415 CE) was a Neoplatonist philosopher, astronomer and mathematician, and daughter of Theon, Greek scholar, from Alexandria, Egypt, then part of the Roman Empire. She was tolerant towards Christians and taught many, including Synesius, who is mentioned here, and who went on to be the Bishop of the city of Ptolemais. Both Arria and Hypatia feature in the catalogues of ‘femmes fortes’ popular in the 1630s and 1640s in particular.

23 Athenais was a 4th-century BCE Greek prophetess who told Alexander the Great of his divine heritage.

24 ‘Intelligent being’ for ‘Être intelligent’. The 1686 Amsterdam edition has ‘air intelligent’ which is harder to make sense of.

"It is easy to reply to this," said Aristene. "You only need to think of the way in which God, having created the universe for his own glory and for men to use, has, so to speak, exposed him to his own industry; God knew full well that men, felling trees to use wood to build, to construct ships and to burn for warmth, would make roads and paths; for to make sure there is enough wood in the world to meet people's needs, there should be an excess, and this is an effect of providence, since one can sometimes burn in one day a tree that took a hundred years to grow."

"It is also remarkable," said Amalthée, "that the countries that do not have any wood, do not need it, either because not many people live there, or they are not cold places."

"I assure you," interrupted Timandre, "that, although my commitment to uncertainty means I can affirm nothing, I admit all the same that proposing the science of atoms in a plausible way required a lively mind.²⁵ If religion could accept it, there would be quite some pleasure in imagining these little eternal, indivisible bodies, whose different shapes are only perceptible by reason, moving continually in the infinity of the centuries, coming and going at random, then meeting and hooking together, according to their different shapes, and forming a large mass, arranged in proportion to the distribution of their weight, descending to form the earth.²⁶ The atoms that were round, polished and light joined up with others like them and were pushed up high by their chance movement to form all the heavens and stars, the height they reached depending on their shape and weight; the smallest and loosest atoms, once escaped from all the other atoms, formed the water which spills and stretches by chance across the whole earth."

"But," interrupted Amalthée, "please tell me," she said to Timandre, "who placed the boundaries on the sea after these so-called atoms formed it; for I see clearly that you are so uncertain that you have not yet fully renounced atoms. Teach me, then, please, who placed limitations on the sea, which throughout all centuries, has remained within the bounds God placed on it."

25 'A lively mind' for 'beaucoup d'esprit'.

26 I have used 'meeting' here where the French is 'se rencontrer' (to meet) and above 'knocking into each other' for 'entrechoquer'; and throughout have used 'hook/hook together' for 's'accrocher' which captures the ancient notion that atoms could link together thanks to hooks and barbs on their surface. See also Christoph Lüthy and Elena Nicoli, eds, *Atoms, Corpuscles and Minima in the Renaissance* (Brill, 2022).

"What madness," interrupted Aristene, without giving Timandre the opportunity to reply, "to imagine that chance alone, through a movement of atoms without motor, as the great libertines would have it, or with motor, as the new, more moderate philosophers explain it, could have made the world as it is.²⁷ It takes an excellent sculptor a lifetime to learn the art of making a beautiful statue, and that only represents the external part of man. What audacity to suppose that this admirable machine of the human body which acts, which walks, which has senses, with which man comes to know the whole universe, and reason, thanks to which man comes to worship what cannot be known perfectly:²⁸ what audacity, I repeat, to suppose that these miserable hooked atoms, as they are represented to us, by hooking together, have made all the wonders of the universe, and have even, according to this philosophy, made our own reason."

"For me," Isidore said agreeably, smiling, "I confess that even though I find this house of cards²⁹ to be quite charming, in the way that Timandre has described it, and as the teacher of my female philosopher friend has explained, when I see these little atoms, revealed in my room

27 This distinction between 'atoms without motor' and 'atoms with motor' refers to the difference between ancient atomism that denied divine interference, and the modern version that saw God as the primary cause. Scudéry associated this modern version with Descartes, who had a materialist and corpuscularian conception of the universe, even though he was against atomism: for instance, he explored how the natural world is composed of particles which interact and are ruled by laws of motion as established and circumscribed by God in his cosmological treatise/fable, *Le Monde ou la traité de la lumière*, which describes a mechanistic and heliocentric universe. On this text, see Garrod, *Cosmographical Novelties*, pp. 151–210. While Pierre Gassendi disagreed with Descartes's method of doubt, favouring experimental evidence, his Christianised version of Epicurean atomism argued that atoms' movements were determined by God as a first cause rather than chance (see the discussion in the Introduction).

28 'Whole universe': I have generally opted for 'universe' for the French 'univers', but sometimes I have used 'world', as documented in the notes. When 'monde' ['world'] is used in the text, I have translated this as 'world.' See also Furetière: 'Univers: Nom collectif qui signifie toutes les creatures créées. Les Anciens ont crû que l'*Univers* n'avoit point de bornes, qu'il étoit infini. C'est Dieu qui a créé l'*Univers*: sa Providence regit l'*Univers*. Univers se prend plus particulièrement pour le globe de la terre, pour toutes les nations ensemble. [A collective noun which means all created creatures. The ancients thought the universe had no limits and that it was infinite. God has created the universe; his providence rules the universe. Universe can also mean more particularly the globe of the earth, and all nations together.]

29 I have used 'house of cards' for the French 'château de cartes': the English also conveys the metaphor of a fragile argument.

by the sun's dancing rays, they seem too stunned by their continual movement to have made such beautiful things. But not seeing anything with clarity for that matter," she added, "I did not see initially that it was an impossibility that they could have done so."

"As far as I'm concerned," said Amerinte, "since it does not suit me to speak about philosophy in the terms of philosophers, when I sometimes see Timandre and another of my friends playing chess, which is a game that one can only lose by making an error; when I see them, using all their intelligence, attention, foresight and judgement to place correctly all these different pieces in moves that determine whether they win or lose; and when I see that, unfailingly, the one who loses made some fault which made him lose, it makes me afraid to think that we might suppose that the sun, the moon, the planets and all the stars in the firmament have been formed and positioned by a chance occurrence. There's no evidence in history for the worth of chance: it might be the case that a painter, in a pique, throwing his sponge at a painting he was working on, represents better the foam that sometimes froths at a horse's bit than he would have done with a brush — although it is not even certain that this is true. But it has never happened that a painter, by throwing either his brushes or sponge, would have produced, I won't say a regular shape, but rather an eye, a hand, or even the merest natural body part. When," she added, "you compare the early paintings of some of our great painters with their later ones, their masterpieces, you will see that it took them a long time to learn the rules of such a fine art and to be able to execute effectively what they have learned.³⁰ It is, therefore, quite ridiculous to think that a chance arrangement of atoms might have made everything in such a regular fashion through a blind movement. The clouds," she continued, "which are, it seems to me, a species of atoms pushed by the wind guiding them at random, have only ever presented chimerical shapes before our eyes. It even occurs to me," she added, "that if it were possible to reduce heaven and earth to atoms, there would be so many that there would be nowhere to put them and that imaginary spaces would be full of them."

"And also," Amalthée continued, "how can it be that in more than 5000 years all the atoms spread throughout the universe have made

30 This reference to the painter derives from Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: see the Introduction for more details.

nothing new and that they are still as stunned as they were, as Isidore so pleasantly described?"

Amerinte replied, "I think that there is a limit to what reason can know, just like there is a limit to how far we can see, beyond which one cannot discern anything distinctly, or know anything with certainty except through inevitable conclusions."³¹

"But these inevitable conclusions," replied Timandre, "which are only supported by the art of conjecture should, in my opinion, authorise the uncertain."

"I do not agree," replied Aristene, "for there are conclusions which are so inevitable that we can boldly argue that sometimes it is possible to know better what we do not see via what we see than it is to know what we see with our own eyes."

"You are right," said Clariste,³² "and our own eyes see objects every day which they cannot distinguish even though they are not far away. For instance," she added, "when I lift my watch to my ear and hear it ticking, I'm convinced that it's working, even though when I look carefully at the hand, my eyes cannot see it moving; rather, after some time, I simply see that it has moved. Can there be more certain knowledge than this, even without the aid of sight?"

"This is a good point," said Aristene, "but to be more precise," he continued, "even those who are the most simple-minded, who possess no learning, seeing the sun rise and set and the regular movement of the stars, cannot doubt that the world is a globe, either turning on its own weight, or with the skies turning around it, obeying the unchanging orders received from he who created them. I'll give another even more natural example of the certainty of this great art of conjectures, when reason makes use of it. We find an example amongst animals: hunters regularly witness dogs in chase of a hare who find three paths but only

31 'inevitable conclusions' for 'conséquences infaillibles'. See the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*: 'conséquence: conclusion tirée d'une ou de plusieurs propositions' [a conclusion drawn from one or several propositions]; and Furetière: 'En Philosophie on le dit de la conclusion d'un raisonnement et de toute sorte d'argumentation' [in philosophy, it is used for the conclusion of a reasoning and all types of argumentation]. 'Infaillible' has as a first meaning 'certain et immuable' [certain and inevitable]: *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*.

32 Presumably this should read 'Amerinte' since there is no character called Clariste in this conversation: there is a Clariste in 'De la Colère', the conversation that precedes this one.

sniff at two of them; having gone half way round to the right and to the left, they launch themselves down the third path without smelling it, reasoning, surely, that since the hare had not gone down the other ones, it must have taken that one. And so, they make chase, find and catch the hare. There are thousands and thousands of examples in nature where we know, as I have just said, with more certainty what we do not see than what we do. Why therefore can people not bring themselves to believe that they have been created by an intelligent, eternal being, all powerful and immutable, which merits our total adoration, when seeing the admirable structure of the universe, and when seeing themselves? Instead, they imagine impossible chimeras which invariably lead to the greatest of all crimes, since the worst ingratitude in the world makes us employ our reason to refuse to recognise the one who afforded it to us in the first place, and makes us prefer to condemn ourselves to nothingness instead of raising ourselves up to God through the knowledge of all the wondrous things he has created. I strongly believe that human reason, when it is not depraved, can and should know God through his works and that one can never think reasonably that these so-called atoms, described as the eternal principles of the universe by those who would make us respect them, can have formed human reason. For, since atoms are, whatever they may say about them, equal in the quality of their principles, and are the same except in shape and weight, how can they afford beings reason which they do not themselves possess?

I know," he pursued, "that the renewed version of this philosophy tells us about a *substance which thinks*, which Epicurus did not mention: and I also am aware that they say this can be explained by the presence of God in chaos or over the waters. However, speaking sincerely, this substance which thinks, confused across the centuries, among hooked atoms which cannot think, does not satisfy reason and can only pass for a rather clever expedience to try to avoid a grave misstep.³³ It would have been better," added Aristene, "to afford intelligence to mountains, seas, rivers, trees, and plants, rather than making machines of all the animals in the world just to get out of a difficult situation, finding no other way — and as a result stumble into one more terrible still. For even the smallest she-monkey, through her industry and intelligence, disproves all the

33 This 'grave mistake' as referred to here and later is atheism.

machines of this great and excellent man, who nevertheless is worthy of being admired for his virtue, knowledge and the scope of his mind and for having given order and plausibility to this branch of philosophy, which sometimes he himself called his philosophical novel.³⁴ But neither he, nor those who went before him, nor their followers, can or will ever be able to prove, regardless of this substance which thinks, how their atoms were able to create man's thought, which makes him able to choose whether or not to do something. Nor can there be any excuse for having used up the last efforts of their reason to defend Epicurus, who teaches us to refuse to recognise God and whose followers prefer even to remove the hope of a life after this one, rather than to retain such an advantage. They take the opposite position to my own, which is as old as the world, certain as I am that God placed this knowledge in the hearts of all people, provided they do not oppose his wisdom. Thus he has been followed in all times, among all nations. Knowledge of a single God is widespread, and this knowledge overcomes all difficulties. For as soon as I believe in a single eternal God, all wise and all powerful, it becomes easier to believe that he created the world as it is, because he wanted to, than to think that some chance occurrence made it in all the regularity we see around us.³⁵ It is not even necessary to have recourse to the bizarre expedient of these machines to avoid so dangerous a step because as soon as I conceive of one single God, I understand that he was able in his omnipotence to give a little portion of light to animals without affording them an immortal soul. And that it was as simple for him to distinguish between souls as it was to afford wildly differing properties to the medicinal fountains which can be found everywhere in the world,³⁶ of which some are hot, some cold, some change, some are constant, even though they are often so close to each other that you might imagine they come from the same source. They are all there to conserve or restore people's health. In a word, knowledge of a single

34 This is a refutation of Descartes's ('the great and excellent man') theory of animal bodies: for a discussion of Scudéry's response as also being to the more trenchant version of the 'animal-machine' as espoused by later Cartesians, see the Introduction. 'Admired' here is for 'admiré' in French: the 1686 Amsterdam edition erroneously has 'miré.'

35 'cas fortuit' is translated as 'chance occurrence' here and elsewhere, which picks up on its similarity of meaning to the 'accident' [chance event] used to describe what happens to the carriage. See note 8 above.

36 This is one of the occasions when 'univers' is best translated as 'world'.

God satisfies one's reason and saves it from much confusion, without posing any danger to that reason. A pagan philosopher, according to Plutarch, recognised the limitless power of the gods worshipped at that time.³⁷ He proposed that he who chose a victim for sacrifice was led by a power, intelligent and divine throughout the universe, and that at the moment of the sacrifice such a change in the entrails of the victim occurred so that what had been there before was no longer there and what was not there before was now present; the philosopher added that this must be easy to believe since all things obey the gods. This was an ingenious idea to support the spurious art of augury, which explained to the people the good and bad augurs of the victims. However, what we learn from this is that even in false religions, believing in a divinity entails embracing its limitless power."

"But," interrupted Isidore, "is it not possible to excuse uncertainty by this formidable diversity of opinions and feelings and even by the way our senses trick us, as I think I've already mentioned?"

"But," replied Aristene, smiling, "I see that you have not read the work by a philosopher who came between Epicurus and the famous Descartes, and which has recently been translated.³⁸ For he argues, thinking to render our reason feeble, that our senses are never mistaken, but it is our mind that is mistaken.³⁹ To support his view, he introduces the example of how in a dream you might think you can see the sun, but you do not in reality. But, in fact, I think that he himself was mistaken, for it is the imagination alone which represents to us that which we think we see and it would not be able to do so if our senses had not already shown it the objects of which imagination shows us the image: but this is but the smallest error of this philosopher. His suicide, as recounted by many authors, dishonours his philosophy, despite the great scope of his mind."

"Admit, at least," said Timandre, "that the diversity of laws, morals

37 Cicero, *De Divinatione*.1.45.

38 The reference is to Lucretius, author of the *De Rerum Natura*, a didactic poem explaining Epicurean atomism (see the Introduction). This was first translated into French prose in 1650 by Michel de Marolles, and again in 1676 in verse; the recent translation referred to here was likely to be that of Jacques Parrain, Baron des Coutures, published by Guillaumin in 1685. Guillaumin also was the publisher of the 1686 *Conversations morales* which includes this text, 'De l'Incertitude'.

39 The French term here is 'esprit' which I've translated here as 'mind': Lucretius hold fast to the Epicurean truth that senses do not deceive, but the mind misinterprets the sight.

and customs across time was, in the past, a justification for the school of those who doubted everything, who no more believed in atoms than other opinions."

"Indeed, the multitude of cases at court," replied Isidore, laughing, "shows, surely, that human reason wavers, for it is easier to recognise whether a case is good or bad than to make a definitive decision about all those things which we do not know and all those which we can only know imperfectly: however, by necessity, half of those who plead are wrong."

"And you could add," replied Timandre, "that in these sorts of things the most significant and immediate decisions often derive from ignorance: whereas, by contrast, uncertainty comes from a very deep knowledge. To support what I'm saying," he added, "I learnt from a man quite advanced in age that he had a friend, who was not only the wisest and most modest man among magistrates but also among literary figures, who was unable to come to a conclusion on uncertain questions, offering many good reasons for both sides, so that one could hardly judge anything after having heard him. He even told his close friends that he was never happier than when his opinion was *not* followed because in that case, he was certain that he had committed no injustice."

"From what you say," replied Aristene, "I recognise the person you are talking about. But what you describe is rather the effect of great insight than real uncertainty."

"In my case," Amalthée added, "I have a friend who writes admirably in verse and prose, who, for the reason you mention, struggles to make up his mind about his work because he never finds it as perfect as the original idea. If I had not succeeded in reassuring him with my praise, he would have removed some very beautiful things: this is motivated by a similar reason to the example you give, as well as concern for reputation."

"That is so: I think, however," said Aristene, "that the character you describe is one who is hard to please, rather than uncertain."

"Don't you agree, at least," replied Timandre, "that some of the laws of antiquity made by the wisest of all men are contradictory, and that all great philosophers disagreed with each other?"

"You could even add," said Aristene, "that they contradict themselves: for some of the most significant among them said things

that demonstrate that they believe in an intelligent being as master of the world and then they also said things which seem to counter this. But this was because they did not dare to speak openly against the false gods that the people worshipped. However, they did not recommend doubting everything, as those who you imitate do and who can only agree on the plausibility of things."

"But all those decisive schools," replied Timandre, "were arrogant. The school that I defend, founded as it was on the weakness and ignorance of human reason, did not affirm anything with certainty and was happy to speak doubtfully, for instance, saying 'that might be', 'it does not seem impossible that this is so', 'I cannot understand', and so on, without ever affirming anything. To tell the truth: I think that in those times, they were right. Larceny was permitted in Sparta and punished everywhere else; some placed virtue as the supreme good, others pleasure. Great philosophers spent most of their lives travelling, persuaded that a change of scene was as useful for the mind as a change of air is for health. And yet, Socrates, the wisest of all men, almost never left Athens and had no interest in travel. Some ancient and modern philosophers have said that animals should not be held in higher regard than plants or even inanimate things, as we've already said; whereas Cimon, son of the famous Miltiades, erected a tomb for the horses who helped him win the prize at the Olympic games.⁴⁰ Aristotle, far from making animals machines, wished for us to care for them; and Plutarch wanted us to be grateful for the horses and dogs that served us well. Montaigne's feelings are opposed to those who place animals alongside plants and inanimate things.⁴¹ Great poets have spoken doubtfully of everything like philosophers: Euripides said the following somewhere, as translated by the learned Monsieur Menard:

*Who of us knows whether dying is not living and living is not dying.*⁴²

40 Cimon (c. 510–450 BCE) was an Athenian general and politician. He fought in the Battle of Salamis against the Achaemenid Empire ruled by Xerxes, who we will encounter in 'The Story of Prince Ariamene'.

41 On Aristotle and Montaigne on animals, see the Introduction. The French here simply states that Montaigne is 'opposé au premier' [opposed to the first (in the list)]: I have clarified this.

42 This quotation is from Euripides's dramatic fragments. The 'savant' here is Pierre Ménard: as Phillip J. Wolfe explains, this quotation is not in his published works but perhaps in a manuscript he shared with Scudéry: see *Choix de Conversations de Mille*

This variety of feelings can be found among warriors as well as among philosophers: the valiant Ajax said that there was glory to be had in killing one's enemy, but that it was the action of a thief to strip a dead body of its spoils. Another brave captain did not agree with this: after a battle, seeing a dead opponent with a golden chain around his neck, he turned to a soldier, showed it to him, and, laughing, said 'take this, he has no use for it now'. How do we even know," added Timandre, "if we are correct in what we think were the feelings of past philosophers since uncertainty reigns in history as it does elsewhere? We see an apt recent example of this: for having stated for 2500 years that Romulus and Remus were nourished by a she-wolf, a famous author has just proved to us that this was a fable, as was the story of the rape of the Sabine women."⁴³

"But," interrupted Isidore, "I saw these two events represented so admirably in paintings in a beautiful cabinet that they seemed like history and not fable."

"It nevertheless remains the case,"⁴⁴ replied Timandre, "and the famous Livy said somewhere that in his time people did not know in Rome with certainty if it was the three Horaces or the three Curiasses who had won: the illustrious Corneille, who wrote such a beautiful tragedy on this subject, was able to choose the outcome he wanted."⁴⁵ We have seen uncertainty reign among the Romans as it did among those they called barbarians: for example, doctors were banished from Rome only to be recalled some centuries later. Nature itself," added Timandre, "authorises uncertainty by the contrary effects it produces: a man called Demophon from Alexandria sweated in the shade and froze in the sun; and in our own time we have encountered people with their liver on the left and their spleen on the right."⁴⁶

de Scudéry (Longo Editore, 1977), p. 106.

43 This is a reference to the Dutch scholar Jacques Gronovius who made this argument in his *Dissertatio de origine Romani* (1684), which was reviewed and summarised in the *Journal des savants*, 26 February 1685.

44 The sense here is that 'it remains the case that uncertainty reigns in history' as per his point above.

45 Pierre Corneille's play *Horace* (1640) was based on Livy's account of this period in Rome's early history: during the reign of Tullus Hostilius, to determine peace with neighbouring Alba Longa, the King decided that the three Horatii brothers should fight their Alban counterparts, the Curiatii.

46 This is another echo from Sextus Empiricus (see the Introduction).

"Allow me," said Isidore smiling, "in order to justify uncertainty, to ask you to agree that since the beginning of the world it has been said and held as a constant that there is no fire without smoke — this has always been the most incontestable of sayings. However, we see at the Foire Saint German that this proverb is false and that by a delightful invention it is possible to make fire that doesn't smoke at all.⁴⁷ But please," she added, smiling, "do not mock me for citing the Foire Saint Germain after so many learned references."

"Far from mocking you," said Timandre, "I find that example both convincing and pleasant. It makes me feel bold enough to say that one should not be surprised if seeing so much uncertainty in nature, in the past, the present, and the future, that this doubting school in their suspension of knowledge should have stopped at simple plausibility; perhaps they were very wrong not to believe in all those criminal gods that people worshipped at the time."

"No," replied Aristene, "but it would have been better if they had spoken like one of the first sages of that time, who, not being able to endure the details with which these illusionary gods were discussed, said that when one speaks of gods, it is enough to say that they exist and to worship them without characterising them. Instead, this school made an inexcusable error in not believing in one single god as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle did, despite what their enemies, and libertines, say; and they made an error in seeking out tranquillity, as they put it, in universal doubt, since nothing is as opposed to tranquillity as doubt and uncertainty."

"I agree with that," said Amalthée, "and nothing is more disagreeable to me."

"I will add to this," said Amerinte, "for, in my view, nothing is more opposed to reason, and it seems to me that the idea that reason cannot come to a decision is very difficult. It is more natural for reason to judge badly than to offer no judgement; and we surely all agree that there are things which are so true they cannot be false, and so therefore universal uncertainty has little foundation."

"And above all," added Aristene, "because doubt is the first step towards libertinage, as I think I've already mentioned, and since there is

47 The Foire Saint Germain was a fair in the Faubourg Saint Germain in a covered marketplace; it included theatre and other spectacles, and was held during Lent.

no libertine who dares to say that he has natural proof of his pernicious belief, and if it were true, which is not the case, no libertine dares to say that one cannot clearly demonstrate to him the contrary of what he thinks, therefore, it would be better, indeed, one should, in a similar state of doubt, I argue, resolve to believe what faith teaches and what reason has authorised for many centuries and not risk eternity on a simple doubt which is only founded on ignorance. For, to speak sincerely, atheism is an extravagance of which man would not be capable if his reason were not depraved and obscured by the disorder of his passions. But as reasonable assumptions are typical in knowledge of things, I'm surprised that libertines do not consider," he continued, smiling, "that among all the descendants of Epicurus and all the other philosophical schools that have doubted the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, almost all of them have given themselves over to their bad inclinations and for the most part to all sorts of vices. You would be forgiven for thinking that they pursue doubt just to avoid self-correction. I wish people would stop talking to me about Epicurus's moderation," he added, "for to all appearances, he owed his sobriety to his unhealthy disposition and not to his philosophy: and the terrible licence taken by most of his disciples dishonoured his doctrine and, to some degree, also his own apparent virtue. How to explain the aversion that, according to the reproaches of a great man, he inspired in his disciples towards most sciences, and fine arts, including astronomy and music?"

"They, most likely," interrupted Amerinte laughing, "thought that the sun, the moon, and the stars were gathered dust."

"That is very pleasantly expressed," replied Aristene. "You could also say that his aversion towards music derived from the constant discord within this school regarding truth and virtue."⁴⁸

"It is nevertheless certain," replied Timandre, "that great men, including great saints, agree on the virtuous moderation of his life. I also acknowledge it as they do," he continued, "but this has rendered the poison of Epicurus's doctrine more dangerous and makes it even more so today. It seems to me," he continued, "that this man, who sought tranquillity in life given the nothingness into which he thought he would return, if I may speak thus, wanted in some way to live after

48 This is a pun on the word 'discordance' in French which, as in English, can be a musical term to refer to a lack of harmony.

death for he celebrated his birthday with joy and even stipulated in his will that it be celebrated in perpetuity. That provision does not seem to me to speak of a philosopher detached from everything and I think that the false glory of being the leader of a new school must have seduced his reason. If he had truly been of the uncertain persuasion," finished Timandre, "he would not have indulged this little moment of vanity."

"Be that as it may," said Aristene, "there are two sorts of pernicious atheists: some who, having sampled briefly all the diverse opinions of different philosophers, do not believe in God without knowing precisely why; others have hardly informed themselves on this matter because they are afraid of being persuaded that there is a second life — because knowing this truth might oblige them to improve themselves. Both types are decidedly uncertain, since it is impossible that they might find any certainty in their detestable belief, as I have said again and again because one can simply not say it enough. Indeed, it is too often the case these days that young people in society have a predilection for libertinage, and that of all the examples on offer, the one they follow most easily is the one which convinces them to doubt everything that is most sacred, without having to examine anything closely or profit from the experience of their fathers or take the advice of those who raised them. On the contrary, they often distrust them and listen instead to a bunch of old libertines, far more guilty than the new generation, who quote for them examples of this moral disorder. For there is among these types a tradition of libertinage which they use to seduce inexperienced and unworldly young people. But we could use in turn against them the argument of a wise pagan philosopher, who could not bear people defending themselves using bad examples. In this he shared the opinion of the famous Demosthenes: 'Do not claim,' this illustrious orator once said to an accused man, 'that what you have done has also been done in the past with impunity, since this only means that you should be punished more severely, for since you would not have committed this crime if the previous example had been followed by a severe punishment, it is just to punish you according to the law so that you yourself will not be imitated.'"⁴⁹

"Your account is very fine indeed," said Amalthée, "and proves

49 Demosthenes was a 4th-century BCE Greek statesman and orator, admired by Cicero: their biographies are told together by Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*, vol. 7.

that one cannot offer too much praise for a King who shows rightful indignation towards even the most minor appearances of libertinage; and who himself offers great examples of piety, making those who follow the bad examples all the more guilty."

"One could even say," added Amerinte, "that not only do bad examples inspire libertines, but they also encourage coquettes, who are often a little bit libertine without realising it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Isidore. "You go too far, and I do not claim to be either libertine or coquette just because I am a little uncertain."

"I was not talking about you," replied Amerinte, "for I know that you are not coquette or libertine and that you are only a little uncertain out of habit, and to make conversation livelier by opposition, but I am talking about some of your female friends who hold their libertine friends in too high regard. I maintain that although libertinage is deplorable and very dangerous for men, it is even more so for ladies. Indeed," she added, "a respectable libertine would not go so far as to steal, betray his friends or assassinate anyone; but I confess that I am of the opinion that a woman who has the misfortune of turning her back on the just demands of religion would probably struggle to refuse the advances of a respectable man who was in love with her and who only wanted to be listened to, to be pitied,⁵⁰ to be treated with a bit of distinction, in other words, who deployed the usual techniques of the most dangerous lovers."

"It is true," said Amalthée, "that this woman would be in greater peril than that in which those libertines who have not yet quite renounced the honour of the world might find themselves, and that, in a word, this character is so detestable, whether in men or in women, that it cannot be faulted enough. And if one observes that all wicked princes have been either without intelligence or without religion and that most libertines of ordinary birth die like beasts or with empty regrets that serve little purpose, given how little time they have left when they repent, it follows

50 I have translated 'honnête homme' as 'respectable man' (and likewise, later, the 'honnête libertin' as 'respectable libertine'): on this choice, see also Nell, *Lucrece and Brutus*, p. 324. In the 17th century, 'honnête' had a specific definition, designating an exemplary social and moral conduct of a well-educated, moderate, refined, and well-mannered man or woman, skilled at the art of conversation. See also, Jacques Du Bosc, *L'Honnête Femme: The Respectable Woman in Society and the New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women*, ed. and trans. by Sharon Diane Nell and Aurora Wolfgang (Iter Press, 2014).

that one would always resolve to take the surest path."⁵¹

"The wise Amalthée speaks perfectly well," replied Aristene, "and uncertainty has never been the characteristic of a hero. Indeed," he continued, "certainty, established on sound principles, is the very stuff of a respectable man, a man of honour, and a great man since it is this alone which makes him act even-temperedly whatever the situation he finds himself in: remaining constant in good or bad luck, in obscurity or renown, public life or private. Instead, the disreputable man, uncertain and frivolous, changes with the wind because he holds no certain principles. Therefore, we see that people of this sort are unable to be constant in anything, adapting themselves to the world's stage, as we say, and to the taste of those whom they want to please, out of pleasure, self-interest, or ambition. He who hardly speaks, says too much, and he who appears modest and fair becomes violent and tyrannical; he who was devout in appearance becomes libertine, and the libertine becomes a hypocrite, since he cannot become a man of good standing. Through a hundred senseless changes, he is always as uncertain as the sea, wavering between calm and turmoil as if determined by an external force. In contrast, equability founded on reasonable certainty is the true character of a man who is steadily virtuous and accomplished. Indeed," added Aristene, looking at Amalthée, "we see a great example of this wise and consistent equability in one of your most illustrious friends, whose rare merit and the approval of a great King, of the most capable King in the world, have raised to the highest dignity of the state.⁵² I will not speak here of his intelligence, his skills, or his specific virtues, which include modesty and munificence, which he does not want to be revealed, nor his generosity, nor his noble heart; but I will emphasise his glory, and say that in all his different roles, he always shows the same quality of wisdom, moderation and equity, which are those expected of a true Chancellor, as is so well expressed in the beautiful inscription on the recent medal depicting him. With three well-chosen words by

51 'the surest path': it is worth noting the frequent images of steps, paths, routes, and even precipices, in this conversation. It is also important to note Scudéry's lexicon: the adjective, 'assuré', and the adverb, 'assurément', are used in parallel to 'certainty'.

52 Louis Boucherat was Chancellor of France from 1685–99. The bronze medal, engraved by Michel Molart, dates to 1685 and the words read 'Justitia. Comes. Beneficentia' (Justice, Companion, Beneficence).

Cicero, the inscription reads that he is endowed with benevolence, companion of Justice, which is the finest, most fitting quality for he who is the primary trustee of the graces and justice of the King. This very sentiment is masterfully expressed by two figures on the medal, of which the principal one is Justice and the other is Abundance — most suited to the true character of the excellent man of whom I speak.”

“It was a good idea,” said Amalthée, “to make that description in a permanent engraving, for I am willing to wager that it will remain forever apposite and that he will always possess the same character we saw in his first roles: that is, an equanimous and uniform treatment of anything which merits the greatest dignities, without any desire himself to achieve them. So that far from opposing what you have just said, I suggest that we should add to these praises. Indeed, his great example demonstrates amply the importance of certainty and makes me accuse more strongly those who are uncertain, persuading me that the only uncertainty that should be praised is that which makes us doubt the unfavourable things said in our presence about those close to us, and even about our own enemies.”

“The wise Amalthée speaks very fairly and very well,” replied Aristene.

“I agree,” said Isidore, “but I confess to my shame that I am not too angry when I learn that people that I do not like have done something wrong, and that I am easily convinced, renouncing uncertainty on this occasion; but to show you that I am not an incorrigible uncertain, I will follow this advice from now on.”⁵³

“As for me,” said Timandre, “I will not rid myself of all uncertainty easily, but I never applied it to religion. I only spoke in the way I did to give Aristene a chance to say all the beautiful things that we have just heard. Indeed, I have not let myself be deceived by this great number of pagan philosophers who doubted the existence of God and the immortality of the soul: I examined their ideas without granting them esteem. But, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and others who know these two great truths, without daring to teach them clearly, have proved an important counterweight to the doctrine of Epicurus and those who have modified and followed it. Indeed, Pythagoras, so learned, so wise,

53 ‘an incorrigible uncertain’: I have retained the substantive as in the French ‘une incertaine incorrigible’.

so virtuous, when asked when one should pray to the gods, answered *all the time*: a Christian philosopher could not have spoken better."

"This is very well noted," replied Aristene. "And the same philosopher also thought we should not demand anything precise for ourselves because man, so he said, cannot know what he needs; instead, he wanted people to ask in their prayers for whatever the divinity they invoked thought appropriate. This rule must, however, have some exceptions," added Aristene, "for example, when Vespasian was about to become Emperor, he made this fine request in prayer: he asked Jupiter to ensure that he would only have to govern over wise people and that he himself would only have to obey wise people."

"This is admirable for a pagan prince," said Amerinte. "For I thought that the false religions of that time hardly ever made such a beautiful sentiment possible. Only the Christian religion teaches pure virtues, through the commandments of God and by the examples of the many Church martyrs and saints who have lived since the death of Jesus Christ."

"Well said," said Aristene. "And anyone who recalls the uninterrupted thread of knowledge of God from the creation of the world to us, who considers, I say, all the prophecies of ancient law fulfilled so exactly in modern law, the incredible way in which Christian religion was established, the prodigious number of martyrs who spread their blood with joy, and the great men and the great saints who both preceded and followed them; the purity of Christian morality which can only come from God, the miracles which have proven this across the centuries, so incontestable that pagans themselves have not dared to doubt them, being content instead to imitate them to weaken their marvel; whoever, I say, remembers everything I have said and thousands of other equally powerful things that I haven't will be rightly astonished that a small number of libertines, the majority of whom are very ignorant, are foolish and imprudent enough to want to drift astray. I am delighted to see that Timandre has not taken his doubt that far; and as for Isidore, I already knew that she possessed only a superficial uncertainty."

"And yet," Isidore said smiling, "it does not appear to me that Timandre and I are totally defeated, or that the Empire of Uncertainty, if one can call it this, is entirely destroyed: for, to speak reasonably, everything that the wise Aristene has said so well only concerns religion

and we agree with that willingly, having renounced all uncertainty with regard to religion."

"Ah, Isidore," sighed Amalthée, "what you say makes me remember some battle I read about once in which both armies celebrated winning: there I was thinking that Amerinte and I owed our complete victory to Aristene."

"That's not the case, however," replied Timandre. "There are a great number of matters for which it is undoubtedly appropriate that a person think whatever they want, and in which laws and reason submit to pure and simple will."

"Would it not be a good idea," said Isidore, smiling agreeably, "to settle the borders of these two states to maintain peace between the decisive and the uncertain, since both states have subjects throughout the whole world — as long as we don't take as long as the commission gathered at Ratisbon took to work out their borders, despite the zeal and the abilities of the Plenipotentiary of France, who is one of my good friends.⁵⁴ However, to make what I propose easier," she added, "I suggest that Aristene, although an enemy of uncertainty, sets out the rules of this peace; I do not think Timandre will object to this."

"Far from it," said Timandre. "I would be obliged to him, as long as he allows us to offer our reasons."

"No, no," said Amerinte, "we shouldn't proceed like this: we should let Aristene draw up the articles of this peace and then we will examine them."

"Or, even better," said Amalthée, "Aristene should be responsible for articles on behalf of the decisive and Timandre for the others; and then we will see if we can put them together."

"In that case," replied Aristene, "I agree. For I would be most irritated," he continued, laughing, "if such aimable people should leave my home in anger, given that peace always reigns in my solitude."

This being resolved, Aristene, once he had spoken to Amalthée and Amerinte, and Timandre had spoken to Isidore, invited Timandre to enter his study and gave him something to write with.⁵⁵ Both men

54 The Truce of Ratisbon ended the War of the Reunions between France and Spain and the Holy Roman Empire: it was signed in Ratisbon August 15th 1684. The Plenipotentiary of France was Louis de Verjus.

55 The French term is 'cabinet' which refers to a small room or study. It is an important

wrote while two of the women entertained themselves by reading and listening to Isidore who was playing most pleasantly a harpsichord she had found in the room where they were waiting for the articles of this famous peace to be drawn up. They did not know if Aristene and Timandre had shown each other what they had each written, but the two men came out of the study just as the ladies returned to the main room and they showed their companions the articles of the peace.

ARTICLES

We, the Decisive and the Uncertain, agree to the following:

That one will take as certain and never doubt

- I. Everything regarding faith;
- II. Everything that the senses reveal equally to all people;
- III. Everything common sense teaches us;
- IV. All the rules agreed by nations and which make up their laws;
- V. That one must follow the rules of the state or country of one's birth and above all the laws of God which are the only laws that are above all others;
- VI. That one must love, serve and obey the King, who is chosen by God;
- VII. That one must always follow natural laws like loving the person who gave one life, showing gratitude for those who are obliging and charity for all;
- VIII. That anything that is unjust is prohibited;
- IX. That one must agree that it is better with regards to active elements of life to make a bad decision than to make no decision at all and to drift forever in uncertainty.

"Here, indeed, is an admirable declaration from the decisive camp," said Amalthée and Amerinte.

"I, however, could quibble," said Isidore, laughing, "over a couple of these articles, especially that one concerning common sense, which varies from person to person; however, for the sake of peace, I will sign this. Let us also see the articles for the uncertain," she said, "for I fear that Timandre may have conceded too much."

motif in Scudéry's conversations which often take place within an enclosed space; this underscores what Elizabeth Goldsmith has termed the 'exclusivity' of Scudéry's imagined conversations. See Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations*, pp. 48–49.

Articles by the Uncertain, agreed by the Decisive:

The following remain uncertain:

- I. All of physics without exception, to avoid an eternal war, can be a subject of uncertainty;
- II. All astrology, about which our eyes, reason, and the experience of all periods have not taught us anything certain;
- III. All medicine, which all authorities since Hippocrates do not agree on perfectly;
- IV. That the same freedom will be established regarding all the sciences and in relation to anything which cannot be decided by the principles established by the articles above;
- V. That Aristene, Leader of the Decisive, remains in agreement that there are many things which each person may decide according to their inclination; for example, if it is better to marry or not to marry;
- VI. To leave uncertain whether it is the sky or the earth which turns, and whether quinine is better against fever than ordinary remedies.⁵⁶

"Ah, please, I beg," interrupted Isidore smiling, "let us be permitted to choose whether we prefer tea, coffee or chocolate, for even though I have read with pleasure a beautiful and curious treatise by an illustrious merchant from Lyon, I have not yet decided between those things."⁵⁷

"I do not dispute this article," said Aristene smiling. "I have even conceded, in favour of the ladies, all music, whether orchestral or vocal, and even the choice of all honourable entertainment, as long as one does not make of it a constant occupation."

"I will not read this article in that case," said Timandre. "But here are the rest:"

- VII. That those who like hunting can choose freely to pursue the type they like best;
- VIII. And, finally, to purge the world of the poorly written books with which we are inundated, no-one should make final judgements on their own writing or contemplate having it published without having shown it to at least two learned and sincere friends.

In good faith we, the Decisive and the Uncertain, have signed these

56 Quinine is discussed in more detail in 'On Butterflies' below (see also the Introduction): this is another point of contact linking the two essays.

57 Philippe Dufour, *Traité nouveaux et curieux du café, du thé et du chocolat* (Girin and Rivière, 1684).

articles, promising to get all the Decisive and Uncertain to ratify them, provided we have a reasonable amount of time to disseminate them and to get people's responses.

"In truth," replied Isidore, with a gently mocking tone, "we should defer the ratification of this peace treaty until the end of time."

"I confess," said Amalthée, "that I did not think that the Empire of Uncertainty was so large."

"Me neither," said Amerinte. "I thought it was smaller."

"After all this," added the wise Aristene, smiling, "I would just like to say that perhaps we should follow what an illustrious author of this century said when one of his friends accused him of being too attached to his opinions; 'you are mistaken,' he replied, 'only God alone can know if man is stubborn or constant.' According to this maxim, in all seriousness, we must admit that only God can know if one is right to be decisive or uncertain."

"That is well said," replied Timandre, "and even better said, because Solomon and Aristotle each said, in their different ways, that our doubts increase the more we learn."

"Who would have thought," said Amerinte, "on leaving Paris that our uncertainty would have made wise Aristene say so many incontestable truths. However," she added, "I hope I am permitted to doubt whether, before we return, there might be time to stroll in the beautiful garden that I glimpsed from the vestibule."

"I would like that too," said Amalthée.

Aristene agreed and led them to the garden where they found a large domed garden room at the end of an avenue beyond the parterre, in which they came across a magnificent meal, testament to Aristene's generosity. This helped persuade Isidore and Timandre that his virtue was genuine with no affectation. The merit of this excellent man was all this group of friends talked about on the way home. Isidore promised her friends that she would no longer permit her other friends to discuss matters of libertinage in her presence, or to speak in her company against religion or against modesty, given that she was a respectable woman.⁵⁸

58 'Respectable woman': the French reads 'honnête femme'. See above note 50 on the concept of the 'honnête homme' in this period.

‘The Story of Two Chameleons’

“Do you remember,” said Bérénice to Méliton, “what you asked me a few days ago, after you had so perfectly satisfied my request, in that beautiful garden so worthy of the illustrious Master to whom it belonged? And do you think that Zénobie, Amérinte, Périandre and Euphranor, whom you have brought to my room,¹ would be interested if I read them everything that my friend, mistress of the chameleons, wrote to a lady of extraordinary merit, who had asked her to send her all the remarks she had made about her two chameleons at the request of her curious and learned friends?”

“I assure you,” replied Méliton, “that I remember this request well and that I have such a high opinion of our companions that I think they will be interested.”

“I can reply on behalf of everyone,” said Zénobie. “I myself would not mind in the least if Bérénice were to also show us some of the other works written on this subject.”

“We will talk about them,” said Bérénice, “after I have finished reading the account of my friend, whom you all know. I even give permission,” she added, “to those who find themselves getting bored to go for a walk and to leave the others to listen to me.”

And so Bérénice started to read the story of the chameleons, even though Euphranor had offered to do it.

1 See note 55 above on ‘cabinet’, translated here as room. The opening request refers to a conversation in the ‘Description de Saint-Cyr’ in the first volume of *New Moral Conversations* (p. 277) — the Chameleons are in the second volume — in which Méliton reminds Bérénice that she had promised to share with them the ‘histoire des caméléons’: they were interrupted on that occasion by the arrival of their carriage. The ‘Description’ continues the conversation of this same group of friends from the preceding dialogue, ‘Histoire de la morale’: for the interconnections between the dialogues, see the Introduction.

* * * * *

Since you have compelled me to write everything I know about the two chameleons that one of my highly esteemed friends gave me, I agree to do so.² Given that the most illustrious men across all ages have spoken about the chameleon with more pleasure and care than afforded to any other animal, and that recently the famous Royal Academy produced a very elegant and detailed treatise, which is at everyone's disposal, I will not interfere by speaking about them as a physician or as a philosopher, since I am not capable. I will instead comment on what I have observed with much care and precision.³

These two chameleons left Alexandria on 1st June 1672. They were placed in a box with several openings so they could breathe the air which is their usual nourishment. The captain of the ship took them out two or three times a day to expose them to sunlight and fresh air. They spent 45 days at sea and arrived in Marseilles on the 15th July. M. le Marquis de Peruys looked after them for six weeks before he found a safe way of conveying them to me, and during that whole time, neither the captain of the ship nor the Marquis ever saw them take or seek any nourishment other than air.⁴ Then, on 4th September 1672, M. de Peruys gave them to his friend, an Abbot who was travelling to Lyon by litter and from there by carriage to Paris; it took him twenty days to make this journey. He exposed the chameleons to air and sunlight for two or three hours a day, but he never saw them eat anything, never even saw them open their little mouths. Finally, I received them at the end of September. Some bran was placed in their box to provide a cushion to stop the chameleons from being knocked together by the bumpy carriage ride.

When I opened the box, the two chameleons were sleeping so deeply that I thought they were dead. Since I had never seen the like of it before,

2 'Compelled' for 'condamner' [condemned]: this seems an odd choice of word in French, so I wonder whether it is a printer error and it is meant to be 'commander': 'to request'.

3 This refers to Claude Perrault's *Anatomical Description of a Chameleon* (1669): please see the discussion in the Introduction. Aristotle and Pliny the Elder also discuss chameleons.

4 The idea that chameleons only eat air was an ancient idea; here it strengthens the association between the chameleons and the sublime: on which, see Anne E. Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime, or of Chameleons', *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 7.1 (2016), pp. 27–41.

I was very surprised by what I saw. The bigger of the two, the male, woke up first: he was at that point a yellowish-grey colour. The little female chameleon was altogether more delicate,⁵ and even though they were similar in shape, they were very different from each other in size and even in colour. The bigger one was half the size of the one the King had had in his possession, and which is represented in the opening pages of the description of it by the members of the Royal Academy.⁶ This animal has so many singular features that it proves endlessly fascinating. His head looks like that of a fish which is called a 'Rouget' in Normandy and 'Gournaut' in Provence;⁷ it also looks a bit like an ancient-style helmet. The usual appearance that this very changing animal adopts is pleasant. His tail, which is almost always curled up tightly, is quite long and is not too fat or thin. Those who describe the chameleon as a reptile are mistaken.⁸ His stomach never touches the ground, either while he is walking or even while sleeping; he instead leans on his feet and tail. His feet resemble little half-open hands because of the number of toes; and his legs look a bit like the arm bones and muscles of a man. It is well known that a chameleon's hands are very dextrous, for attaching onto branches to climb up and down a tree. This animal has a slow, serious and majestic gait. He never takes a step without having thought first about where he will place his foot. Even though he walks slowly, he can still get quite far because his legs are quite long when they are outstretched; advancing his hind leg first, he places it against the front leg and takes a large stride as the front leg moves forward. His body makes no sudden movement at all, apart from his eyes: he turns his head very slowly and he also walks slowly, as I've said. His skin has the polished and glossy quality of shagreen, and the extent of its patterns change according to when one sees him.

However, what is most admirable is this animal's eyes. I have never been more surprised than I was when my two chameleons woke up and

5 Scudéry feminises 'caméléone' by adding an 'e' and by using a feminine pronoun: this is not a common term and its particularity strengthens my decision to use animate pronouns in English.

6 This refers to Abraham Bosse's image of the chameleon, and its dissected parts, included in Perrault's 1669 *Description anatomique* (Léonard, 1669) and in the 1671 *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* (l'Imprimerie Royale, 1671).

7 Mullet.

8 It is significant that Scudéry distinguishes the chameleon from a reptile, which is a lowly creature, see Duggan, 'Madeleine de Scudéry's Animal Sublime', p. 36.

I saw their gaze. The chameleon is the only animal in the world whose eyelids follow all the movements of its pupil. The eyelids of the two chameleons in my possession were not only shagreen-like over the eyes,⁹ but they were also decorated with lines or little circular mouldings which changed like the rest of the body when these animals were marked with different colours. These eyelids, which cover the eyes like a tunic, have a small round hole through which one can see a shiny, black pupil, surrounded by the most beautiful small golden circle. These eyes, so marvellous and extraordinary, are of more use to this animal than the hundred eyes that the fable gives to Argus, because he can look straight up to the sky, down to the earth, straight ahead and even backwards; if he so wants, when one eye looks up, the other looks down; when one looks behind, the other ahead.¹⁰ When it so takes his fancy, both eyes can look in the same direction; or alternatively, if he so wishes, one remains still and the other turns wherever he wants it to. His eyes are thus made in such a way that, if he wishes, he can see in all directions without turning his head. It is easy to note that he sees with intelligence and judgement, whether he is walking, climbing a tree or choosing a place to rest.¹¹ Usually, he seeks out the sun whose rays, I think, nourish him as well as the air does; as much as possible, he avoids walking on the ground, especially if it is damp.

I thought for a whole month that these little animals never opened their mouths, given that they were always sealed and closed; but once I carried them into my little garden, I saw the little female chameleon open her little mouth and unfurl her tongue. It was crimson red like a rose and shaped like a little elephant's trunk. I also saw her dart her tongue against a little stone, though she did not take it. I offered her flies and gnats, ants and little worms, but she did not want to take anything. I put both chameleons in an oleander box, thinking that when they

9 'shagreen-like': Scudéry uses an adjective of her own invention, 'chagrinée', from the noun 'chagrin', here meaning a shagreen, a rough, textured material deriving from horse or donkey hide, to describe the texture and quality of the skin. See also *Histoire de deux caméléons, suivi de Description anatomique de Claude Perrault*, ed. by Aude Volpilhac, with Anthony Herrel and Thierry Hoquet (Marchaisse, 2022), p. 69.

10 According to Greek mythology, Hera, Queen of the gods and wife of Zeus, had the hundred eyes of her watchman, Argus, turned into the peacock's tail to immortalise him.

11 I have translated 'esprit' which refers to the mind, to reason, to wit, here as 'intelligence'.

climbed this little tree, it would be easy for me to get them down again. However, as I was talking to M. de Pellisson, who was admiring them with me, I had hardly turned my head when I could only see one of them; I thought that the other had climbed high up in the oleander, but I couldn't find him there. I looked in the pot at the bottom of the plant and couldn't see him there either. I simply could not understand how a little animal who walked so slowly could get so far away so quickly. I was worried because there is a little wood at the other end of my garden and I was afraid of him getting lost in it. I myself looked for him carefully. M. de Pellisson got all his servants to come and we looked for more than three hours in vain; but finally, after I'd promised a reward for finding him, my footman did so four hours later at the top of a young acacia tree at the entrance of the wood, more than fifteen paces from the spot where I'd left them. If the chameleon had climbed up the large nearby sycamore, we would have lost him. I was delighted to find him again.

After that episode, I made them a more comfortable home than their box so that I didn't have to take them into the fresh air so often. Since there is a window, which looks onto my garden, in a little study that I have, I had some brass wire placed on my side and on the garden side so that I could see them. I opened their box and covered the whole recess of the window with a little rug and let them do as they pleased. They would only wake up when the sun came up. On waking they were usually a little pale. The female was much more golden and more brightly coloured, and the male was browner and greyer; but on waking they were both a little pale, as I've said; but as the sun rose, their colour got stronger, just as they did. They would first raise their heads and swivel their eyes all around to see their surroundings; then, raising themselves gently onto the edge of the box with their little hands, they would look around once again and then they would decide to climb down, always choosing the sunny garden side. I would then open the window to let them breathe the fresh air and soon their stomachs, necks, and all parts of their little bodies would swell up. This would last for varying amounts of time. Sometimes, they became covered in the most beautiful marks the world has ever seen; sometimes they were greyish brown, sometimes a silvery grey mixed with black. The main colour of

the female was gold and pale violet;¹² she also often turned into a green colour mixed with gold or green mixed with flesh colour. The male, on the other hand, changed between black, grey-brown, a fleshy purple colour, and white, all varied in many very different ways. Occasionally, on a cold evening, I saw him turn fully a pure white colour; and at ten in the evening, several times, he was entirely pale yellow, but almost daily, and several times a day, he was marked in a most pleasant way from the top of his head to the end of his tail and all the way to his little toes. I also saw him more than thirty times as if he had camel-like skin of a mix of crimson, white, and green.¹³ When he was like this, he was neither fully swollen nor at his thinnest; but when he was thin, he was extremely so, without any fat at all.

About five weeks after I first acquired these chameleons and all of Paris had come to see them, as I showed them off in my study to many people — and to better display them, I made them climb along a silk cloth with gold stripes on a red background which made them look beautiful — a gentleman came and picking up the female rather roughly, hurt her and tore off her leg. She lived for another eight or ten days but then died. I will say at this point that during the five weeks that I had these two animals together, I noticed an extreme friendship between them and never the least bit of irritation. They were always side by side: if one moved, the other would follow; their little hands clasped together. On the last day of the female's life, I observed her more than I had before. For the previous two days, she had not had the strength to get up to go to the sunshine, though she remained very beautiful, and hardly opened her eyes; however, she made an effort, just before she died, and wanted to get up with more haste than when she was well. She fell over twice and died passing a little odourless excrement, which

12 As discussed in the Introduction, Scudéry's colour vocabulary is extensive: 'pale violet' here is a more nuanced 'gris-de-lin' in French which, according to Furetière, means 'une nuance violette qui a plusieurs degrez depuis le plus clair jusqu'au plus brun' [a violet shade, of various degrees, from light to brown] and to Ménage, 'couleur, ainsi appelée de sa ressemblance à la fleur de lin' [colour, called thus because of its resemblance to a flax flower], which is pale violet.

13 'camel-like skin': this is an approximative translation that loses some of Scudéry's sense. The French reads 'peau de camelot', where 'camelot' means a fabric made of camel [chameau] or goat hair, silk or wool, and perhaps, as Volpilhac suggests, evokes the etymological linking of 'chameleon' with 'chameau-lion' (Volpilhac et al., p. 72), which Perrault also notes (*ibid.*, p. 118).

I will discuss shortly. The male was so surprised and so afflicted by her death that he climbed with great haste and emotion to the top of the frame,¹⁴ from which he fell three times: I feared that her body tormented him so much that I moved the little chameleon and the rug on which she had died. I replaced it with another and caressed the male to console him. He was extremely sorrowful and downcast for two or three days. As I redoubled my efforts to care for him, and began to hold him in my hand and to call him *Méléon*, since 'chameleon' was too long, he came to like me, to know me, to understand his name and to recognise my voice: such that I am certain that those who say that chameleons cannot hear are wrong for I could clearly see that this one heard me, knew me and could recognise my voice. When I said to him, '*Méléon, Méléon, come here*', if he was in an idle mood and did not want to move, he would still turn his eyes towards me in a way that makes me certain that he had heard; and when he was not feeling idle, he would come onto my hand, and sleep there, curling up his little tail in the way that is natural for chameleons. I often noted that other people would hold out their hands for him to step onto, but when he saw this, he would move away and resolve to climb up my arm rather than go onto another person's hand.

His skin I always found to be cold, except when he was at his thinnest and had been in the sun a long time, then I sometimes found his skin to be a little warm. But I noticed that when he was very thin, he hardly walked, instead he rested and turned towards the sun. When his throat was swollen, he did not move either; but when his body was swollen, he happily climbed up the frame or the brass wire opposite and he would hang there for a long time as if to reduce his swelling. I never saw their heartbeat, or any indication of breath, except when they were about to die: I witnessed both three or four hours prior to death with their little flanks heaving. The female opened her little mouth when she died, the male did not.

As for voice, this animal has none. But as regards sweetness and judgement, this animal could not have more. I never saw the chameleon

14 'Emotion' for the French 'transport': although can mean the action of moving (as in the English 'transport') it also, according to Furetière, '*se dit aussi figurément en choses morales, du trouble ou de l'agitation de l'ame par la violence des passions*' [also means figuratively in moral matters, trouble, or the agitations of the soul by the violence of passions].

do the slightest thing which could make one think that he wanted to cause harm; although he had sharp little nails, I never felt them. The chameleon's tongue is something of a marvel, but the men of the Royal Academy have discussed this in such detail that I have nothing to add. I recommend that those interested should read what they have written. I will only say that during the entire period that I had the chameleon, I never saw him eat flies, although I offered him many different types; in fact, I never saw him eat anything and am persuaded that air and sunlight are chameleon's true nourishment. I think that in their own country where the dew is more abundant, chameleons might dart out their tongues to drink in this little viscous humour which resembles the juice of a grape, for in hot countries dew is like melted manna — indeed, it is thought that manna is nothing more than thick dew.¹⁵ In the last two months of the chameleon's life, I decided to bring a sliced white grape to his mouth and rubbed it against it gently. The smell or the taste of the grape certainly pleased him and it made him open his mouth and even stick out his tongue as if to wipe off the dampness that had remained on his little jaws and teeth, which were certainly never intended for eating, given that they are small, weak and slot together, but rather to better close the mouth and to keep in the air. Since then, every four or five days I managed to make him open his mouth and stick out his tongue. Sometimes, he would sniff a bunch of grapes which I hung against the window, but he would not eat anything, taking no more from a single grape with his tongue than a bee from a flower. However, he would become so swollen in doing so that it was a great pleasure to see him in a state which sometimes resembled drunkenness. I could see why this animal has little chevrons on his side which open and close at the middle like a mathematical compass, because when, unusually, his stomach did touch the ground, the spine of his back would sink down and each of his sides would get larger. He would raise his head by turning himself, and creeping to the frame, would get up and climb the window where he would resume his previous shape. I once saw him so crimson and puffy that I was afraid he would burst. It is remarkable that we do not know how this swelling comes and goes.

We know even less about what causes the change in colour and I

15 'Viscous humour': humour here means liquid or fluid.

challenge any philosopher to find a convincing reason. It is certain that sometimes my chameleons took on elements of the colours on which I placed them, but not always: and yet, every time their skin was a variety of colours, the colour of the item on which they were placed was intermingled with their colours. Several times, I saw the little female chameleon in my garden almost entirely marked with the yellowish-green of her surroundings; and the male chameleon would become almost entirely marked with purple, yellow and white while on a rug of those colours. But I also saw him on that very rug with no other colour than his customary pale yellowish grey-brown. Sometimes I saw that fire made them change colour a little and that they changed colour even while they were sleeping. The cold seemed the least likely to make them change colour. These changes occurred without them changing location, without anything irritating or pleasing them, and in the sun or the shade. Sometimes I noticed that one side of the animal was supremely beautiful and with the finest patterns, while the other was all black with no marks. Surprisingly the side facing the sun was the ugly and dark side, while the opposite side was the beautiful one, so it cannot be said that it is the sunshine which causes change, although it has more effect than anything else. Nor is it the case that it is caused by the arrangement of the little shagreen-like spots which make up the skin, because almost at the same moment, in the same place, the chameleon can be beautiful and ugly, with varied patterns and plain, without any apparent change occurring either in itself or its environment. Furthermore, I have not seen any indication that this animal has violent passions to suggest that these changes in colour occur as they do in men's faces when they go red with anger. It seemed to me that when my chameleon was most speckled, it was when he was happiest and at his best, that is, in the middle of the day, from ten in the morning to three or four o'clock in the afternoon. No-one could have taken more care observing him than I did during these seven months, but I was never able to see a real and convincing cause of the change of colour. Thus, I admire all the apparent reasons that the worthiest men who have written about chameleons have found, but I would thank them also to have admitted in good faith that these reasons are not definitively convincing and to have given me the freedom to say that the cause of the variety of colours of a chameleon is hardly less hidden than the cause of the virtues of the lodestone.

It is certain that the two chameleons, who ate nothing in the ten months since they left Alexandria, produced almost no excrement. In two months, the little female chameleon produced two, the first a month after her arrival and the second as she died; and in seven months, the male produced four. This excrement was yellow, the colour of musk and a little stone of a whitish brown-yellow colour. It was without odour and quite firm; this excrement does not contradict the fact that air is the natural food for a chameleon, because hail and snow are simply in some ways thickened air. Be that as it may, I do not offer any judgement; I am simply saying what I saw.

I will also say, following that intention, that once winter arrived, I did everything I could to keep my chameleon alive. I decided to put a flat tin bottle containing hot water in his house, as deep as a window, as I've described, to warm up the air. But to stop him from burning himself if he climbed on it, I covered it with a little rug. This animal quickly made use of the comfort I provided for him; in the morning, when he came out of the box in which I kept him overnight, he would sit on that warm rug. If the sun was shining, he would move, preferring the natural warmth of the sun to this artificial heat. He would place himself against the window facing the garden, on one side or another; but once the sun had gone in, he would move back to his warm rug and sit there very happily. When night fell, he would sleep on this same rug at the foot of the bottle or he would try to hide, climbing up the frame or the wire, holding on with his four little hands; but I would not let him stay there long as the cold would have killed him. He was always pale in colour at that time; and having forgotten to put him in his box on two occasions, when I remembered at midnight, I found him almost all white and extremely cold, so that I put him in his box next to the warm bottle, which I refilled in the morning, at midday and in the evening.

I happily got this amiable little animal though winter until early April when I fell ill enough to take to my bed for two days and was not able to look after my chameleon myself. I got one of my servant girls to look after him, but by bad luck, there was snow and an unexpected cold spell, so that when I saw him the next day, he was very sorrowful. He still heard and knew me as usual, but I could see that he was lethargic in getting up and that he was turning his eyes more slowly than usual. I caressed him; I took him in my hand; I put him on his warm rug; he did

change colour but much more feebly than before when he was in good health. He spent two days in this languor and died on the third day, having made three efforts to get up, as the female had done. He did not defecate in death as she had done; he didn't even open his mouth. He remained very beautiful, just as he remains now in my study; a quarter of an hour before he died, I called him by the name, 'Méléon', that I'd given him, and he opened his eyes slowly, turning to me and still clearly recognising me.¹⁶

The Messieurs Perrault and Pecquet of the Royal Academy had asked me to let them know if he died so they could conduct a dissection, as they had done for the little female chameleon; I kept my word and let them know; I took them to Monsieur Conrart's house as he was curious to see the dissection and was not able to leave his house. They found out that the one which lived the longest was the male, as we had always thought. The little female chameleon, which they had opened, had many large eggs inside her like little peas of a beautiful golden colour. The male did not have such eggs. His tongue, his heart, his liver, his lungs, his intestines and his ribs, all these other parts were just as these Messieurs represented them in their treatise, but they were more delicate because my chameleons were much smaller than the one which the King had given them, which they had kept for about a month. I actually think theirs was of a different species from what I've heard about it and from their description of its shape, which was much larger; nothing was prettier than mine were because of their delicate nature and the variety of the shapes and colours they could adopt, often changing twenty times a day.

It was surprising that there was not a single drop of blood when they did the dissection. The chameleons' teeth, which looked as sharp as a saw and which were slotted together, were so weak and delicate that it is evident that they are not made for eating but simply to help them close their mouths better, as I have already said. What also surprised me was that their breathing was not visible; and yet, sometimes they swelled up like little balls. The air must pass through their nostrils, which are prominent, or through the pores that cover their skin. As for their hearing, I am certain from my seven months of experience, that they

16 'Just as he remains now in my study' refers to the dried-out skin she kept as a memento: see the ensuing description of the dissection.

have a little space between the helmet of their head and their neck, and sounds pass here through some little conduit that is imperceptible to the eye, for I've often remarked that there are such delicate parts which even the most skilful operation cannot reveal: for instance, the small and marvellous machines of the eyes of this animal, so different from all other animals. I must add that once the eye was cut out and the lid that covered it was removed, it was the most beautiful thing in the world. The main body of the eye appeared like a perfect pearl in its roundness, whiteness and lustre; the little black and bright pupil was surrounded by a circle of the most beautiful gold that was encircled in turn by a pink border, which was not visible when the animal was alive. The eye kept its beauty for three or four days. I kept the animal's skin stuffed with cotton and even though it was dried out, it seemed like a grey Dutch cloth, mixed with some other colour.

I cannot find any information about how long chameleons live. I wrote to the consul of Alexandria, who is a friend, so that he might find out from someone in his country: I will add his response here. I will now include the beautiful and pleasant poems which some friends of mine have written out of affection for me to help keep alive the memory of my two little animals who kept me so entertained while alive and whose deaths have offered me new pleasures thanks to the inventive praise of my friends.

* * * * *

"You were wrong," said Méliton to Bérénice, once she had finished reading, "to fear that we would get bored, for this account is so interesting and well written."

Periandre and Euphrenor agreed with Méliton, and Zénobie and Amérinte did not contradict them. But having praised what they had just heard, they then encouraged Bérénice to show them some of the poems written about the chameleons, knowing that she was in possession of them all.

"I agree," said Bérénice. "But only on the condition that I can select just a few of them, even though they are all very pleasant."

"I think there is an intriguing poem by one of the friends of the

chameleon's mistress," added Zénobie.¹⁷

"I shall start with that one," said Bérénice. "Since Periandre reads so well, I will pass it to him."

Bérénice gave him this poem which he read to the whole gathering, reserving some of the shorter ones for later, if this was desired.

The Chameleon, a Poem

First Canto

I sing of an animal as gallant as it is rare,
A beautiful chameleon, that adorns Africa,
Who, coming to Palmis¹⁸ from the far reaches of the world,
Overcame challenges and crossed the seas.
Rumour spread and everyone came to see him *chez elle*,
This amiable African, so beautiful in form.
All of Paris was charmed by this noble animal
Who renounced his homeland for her:
A thousand times we admired his colours and his shapes,
But we did not know much about his adventures
And Palmis, hoping that posterity
Would hear of this beautiful foreigner's fidelity,
Wanted him to tell his own tender story himself.
And since Palmis wanted it, how could he resist?
Quadrupeds, birds, fish, rocks and woods
Speak when it pleases her and find their voice.¹⁹
To suit her desires, Palmis performs miracles,
And offers the world these astonishing spectacles.
One day when she saw her friends assembled
She said, "Speak, Chameleon, speak":
And the Chameleon, a beast hitherto mute,
Spoke as the warbler had once done.²⁰

17 There is a side note in the margin 'M. Betoul': this refers to Élie de Bétoulaud, author of the first poem, friend of Scudéry's, and also known as Damon.

18 Palmis is another salon name for Madeleine de Scudéry, Sapho being the most frequently used.

19 These refer to the other animal poems associated with Scudéry and her circle, some of which are included in this volume.

20 The reference here to the warbler ('fauvette' in French) is likely intended to recall

Everyone immediately fell silent and listened to him.
 And this is a faithful account of what he said:
 "Without Palmis' order, and without her omnipotence,
 I would have remained in stubborn silence;
 But the honour of obeying her was stronger
 And obliges me to recount the story of my fate.
 Before my terrible crime for which I bear the sentence,
 In ancient Memphis, I had a human figure,
 And I would once have been a happy prince,
 Had the heavens afforded me a more loving heart.
 But in my beautiful body, I had an unfaithful soul:
 Without ever being constant, I flitted from beauty to beauty,
 Now adorned with the colours of Eunoe,
 Now with those of Arsinoe:²¹
 I loved both the Royal sceptre and the shepherdess's staff.
 On one day, Cleopatra, and the next, Timarette,²²
 I delighted in this inconstancy:
 In change alone was I constant.
 The fair sex indignant at so cowardly an offence,
 At the altars of Osiris demanded vengeance.²³
 With useless pretexts I tried to excuse myself:²⁴
 All-seeing Osiris was beyond deception,
 And this formidable god, vexed that in my soul
 There was every day a new flame,
 Transformed me there and then into a chameleon.

another cycle of animal poems about Sapho's warbler: see below in this translation and see also the discussion of manuscript poems in the Introduction.

- 21 Eunoe and Arsinoe were both queens: Eunoe probably refers to Eunoë Maura, wife of Bogudes, King of Western Mauretania, speculated to have had an affair with Julius Caesar (replacing Cleopatra) when he was in North Africa. Arsinoe probably refers to Arsinoe IV, sister of Cleopatra.
- 22 Timarette is a common name in comedy for a shepherdess or character of a lower class. Timarette also features in the 'Histoire de Sésostris', one of the interpolated stories of *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* (my thanks to Anne Spica for noting this).
- 23 Osiris was one of the most important deities in Egypt: god of the underworld, of death and resurrection; he also symbolised the cycle of Nile floods, and so was god of vegetation, agriculture and fertility.
- 24 Pun here: the French reads 'par de vaines couleurs je voulus m'excuser', with 'couleurs' here meaning pretensions but also anticipating the literal colours of the chameleon.

My original character is still evident,
For I can change at any moment my shape and my colour:
And so you see the picture of a faithless heart.
New chameleons, unfaithful lovers,
Tremble and learn from all my punishments.
Leading, as I am, from now on, nothing but a lowly life,²⁵
Gnawed at by remorse.
Despite my new shape, alas, I still wanted one day to be
Constant in friendship, at least more so than in love.
I had made this resolution when, sitting near a rock,
I heard two Africans talking; curious, I approached them
To eavesdrop on their conversation;
And I heard one say these words to the other:
'Listen, wise Almoradis, who in your learned vigils
Have weighed up the wonders of the earth and sky,
Stop examining with your reason
The miracles of the Nile and its floods
And concentrate on finding where this illustrious maiden
Sources all the rays which shine in her beautiful soul.
The sun which sees all, sees nothing under the skies
As good, as great, or as extraordinary as her:
Counting the virtues of this heroic heart
Is like counting the grains of sand in Africa.
Palmis, who lives in the reign of one of the greatest Kings,
Is herself the honour of the French Empire.'
Then, as if seized by a sudden fury,
Looking towards the forest which surrounded the plain,
The man got up suddenly and continued:
'Panthers, leopards, lynx,²⁶ rhinoceros,
You monsters, terrible inhabitants of our woeful shores,
Go and learn from Palmis, and you will be less savage;
And you, ever-changeable chameleons,

25 Another pun: 'rampante vie' in the French means both crawling (as in the movement of the chameleon) and lowly.

26 Lynx for 'once' in French: later this term came to mean 'snow leopard', but Cotgrave gives 'lynx' or 'spotted ounce'; Ménage, 'lynx', and Furetière 'a beast used in Persia to chase gazelles' (most likely the Eurasian lynx).

Go and learn from Palmis, and you will be less inconstant.⁷
 Hardly had he finished his impassioned speech
 When I felt his fire spread to my soul,
 And suddenly struck by the virtues of Palmis,
 I saw myself caught in new ties.
 It would have been futile to resist:
 Palmis took a heart that Eunoe was not able to capture.
 Despite the sad shape that the gods have reduced me to,
 This glorious portrait charmed me day and night,
 And since, in this state, by rare advantage,
 I was able to conserve my human reason,
 From that moment, the desire to see her,
 Was my only thought and my sweetest hope.
 Motivated by this resolve, I made my way to a harbour,
 And only brought with me a single companion.
 Both of us, departing without family or entourage,
 Left without regret the African shores.
 But, alas, when crossing the sea to seek one's desire,
 How slowly the winds seem to blow!
 Ah, how weak the Aquilon!²⁷
 Ah, how long it was before we anchored at our desired port!
 Finally, once disembarked on the coast of Provence,
 Burning with a secret and tender impatience,
 We hastened day and night to make the journey
 Until — at last! — from Marseilles we arrived in Paris.
 And the illustrious Palmis, my dear, kind Mistress
 Received us immediately with great tenderness.
 Hardly had she spoken when, moved by my own happiness,
 At her charming words, I changed colour.
 Who would not change colour at so many wonders?
 Egypt, my country, has nothing that compares.
 When Palmis had examined me a little at her home,
 And had reassured me with her goodness,
 Thinking myself still a Prince, I wanted, in her language,
 To make her a short address,

27 The Aquilon is the name of the North-East wind.

A succinct speech of praise, in which, with a subtle tongue
I would have traced her brilliant virtues.
But, alas, that we are so often aware of our desires!
Mute as a fish I could not say anything
And searching in vain for the voice,
Which I once used to express myself in Memphis,
I instead had to rely on these pleasant swans —
Known as Genets, Platbuissons and Lavignes²⁸ —
They all spoke to her for me. But since that moment
I proposed to please her in a different way
And wanted from one hour to the next, in a hundred different
gallant forms,
To appear before her, adorned with different colours,
Painting for her in an instant both the earth and the skies,
Painting her very portrait before my eyes.
If these various visions might please Palmis,
Then, that's it: I renounce forever great Cairo:
Farewell, Black Zahide, prized among Africans
Farwell Zara: I pass into more noble hands.
You did once with your enticing caresses,
Offer me much tenderness;
But in Paris I find a sweeter empire,
Farewell: I no longer want to remember you."

Second Canto

This unexpected surprise confounded
The reason and sight of curious onlookers.
"Where," they said, "have these sudden enchantments,
Which the chameleon strikes us with at every moment, come
from?
Iris, daughter of the air, so pure and brilliant,
Paints with fewer colours a bright cloud;²⁹

28 A marginal note reads: 'these three people wrote pleasant poetry for him.' Charles-Claude Genest, Mme de Platbuisson and Anne de la Vigne are amongst those who wrote the poems in this work.

29 Iris is the goddess of the rainbow in Greek mythology.

And the opal portrait of this very Iris
 With fewer changes still astounds us."
 Everyone was in amazement: blonde Isménie;
 Madonte with dark eyes; the wise Urania;
 And pleasant Philis, who often mistook the chameleon,
 For a magician versed in spells.³⁰
 All thought they encountered among us the renowned Proteus
 Whose story is told throughout the world.³¹
 And while on the banks of the Seine, such a rare enchanter
 Deceived in a thousand ways the eyes of the spectator,
 This charming animal, so faithful to Palmis,
 Would languish, woeful, if he was not near her.
 The tones of her voice, her amiable speech,
 Were his only life and his only love.
 One day, therefore, when this source of life was absent,
 — For Palmis had gone to seek out Célie in Mantes³² —
 He could not bear this sad separation:
 He let out a long groan
 And, as if borrowing words from the time of Aesop,
 He thus expressed his unfounded fear:
 "You flee me, and full of false hope,
 Will I now live on air and wind alone?
 Ah Palmis, treat your conquests with more care.
 The gods in the shape of beasts have a thousand times
 Sped across the land or swum in the sea;
 And what chameleon was greater than Jupiter?
 Who changed colour and shape more often than him,
 And who is better for me to emulate?
 And yet, you flee and leaving this place,
 You leave me prey to listless dissatisfaction."
 As he was falling into this overwhelming languor

30 These names might be pseudonyms for Scudéry's other friends: for instance, Philis in other contexts (e.g. a poem by Chapelain from the 1650s) referred to Antoinette Deshoulières: see Alain Niderst, *Madeleine de Scudéry, Paul Pellisson et leur monde* (Nizet, 1671), pp. 330–32.

31 Proteus was a shape-shifting sea-god in Greek mythology.

32 Célie is the name used for Madame de Platbuisson (author of one of the chameleon poems), see p. 138.

The magnanimous Cléante³³ arrived,
Whose divine voice, in similar sorrows,
Enchants and dispels even the most acute grief.
"Be consoled," he said. "Palmis will come back
Today, maybe even presently:
The Muses accompanying her to this place,
Will brighten her stay with vivid rays."
To what end, against such a strong and touching voice,
The powerless revolt of the beautiful chameleon?
"Cléante," he said, "I know that in these moments,
No-one can resist your enchanting words,
You can animate new warblers
With voices more beautiful than their own,
You could even make the orange trees speak,
Even the apricots and pears of the orchard.
For lovers overwhelmed by their troubles,
To charm their sadness, to sweeten their pain,
In the Bois de Boulogne or the Meudon woods³⁴
You can make the tender Eurymedon³⁵ speak,
And you can also, with a ray of hope,
Sweeten the anguish of a cruel absence.
But alas! This hope still gleams and glimmers too slowly,
For the one far from Palmis cannot live a moment longer."
Hardly had he said these words when he heard
That Palmis was not twenty paces away.
In an instant this news dissipated the languor
Which had gripped the heart of this tender animal.
To receive Palmis, brought home by happy fate,
This household restrained at first its cries of joy,
Then, with a swift foot, everyone went to meet her,

33 Cléante is one of the names used for Paul Pellisson (1624–93).

34 The Bois de Boulogne is a forest West of Paris; the Meudon woods are between Paris and Versailles.

35 *Eurymedon* was a long epic poem by Paul Pellisson composed while he was imprisoned in 1661 for his proximity to Nicolas Fouquet, the King's finance minister, who was accused of *lèse-majesté* (disrespect towards a monarch) and also imprisoned. Pellisson was also author of poems about the warbler (and orange tress etc. as mentioned in the lines above).

Vying to hear her and to see her.
 The pigeon and the turtledove³⁶
 Flew swiftly towards her
 And the concerned and jealous Chameleon,
 Seeing himself overtaken in such sweet duty,
 To arrive more quickly where Palmis was,
 Suddenly leapt from the top of a window.
 Transported by the ardour that possessed him,
 He thought he could overtake the others in the air,
 With eagerness as a guide, he thought himself able to fly like
 them,
 He thought himself an eagle with swift wing:
 But, alas, what misfortune! He crashed down as he fell,
 And succumbed under his own weight;
 Despite the prompt aid of kindly Cléante,
 Soon awful death presented itself to his eyes.
 Crushed, pale, livid, he changed colour,
 He expired, and — note the extent of his misfortune —
 For at the very moment he took his last breath,
 Palmis arrived, too late:
 “My dear Chameleon,” she said several times,
 But he already possessed no movement or voice,
 And this tender animal in the moment of his affliction,
 Cast Palmis only a dying glance,
 And barbaric Fate, cutting the thread,
 Sent his beautiful soul forever into exile.
 Alas, what events, what fearsome disorder,
 Did this pitiful death not cause!
 Two faithful mirrors which, like obliging painters,
 Represented everything so diligently,
 Cracked from one corner to the other in grief;
 Six crystal vases split,
 Two conch-shells, once the trumpets that two Tritons
 Used to chase seals and tuna,
 Two branches of coral, a present with which Amphitrite³⁷

36 We meet these other pet animals in the manuscript poetry, see below.

37 Goddess of the sea and wife of Poseidon. Triton was their son.

Honoured Palmis on our shores,
From a cornice, alas, falling suddenly,
Smashed in this fatal moment!
But just as cruel Fate, unyielding at our pleas,
In Palmis' lodgings caused this terrible fracas,
From the highest tree to the smallest flower,
So too was everything in the garden moved by this misfortune.
Myrtle, acacia and Pyramus's tree,³⁸
Appeared suddenly without greenery and without soul,
The sad honeysuckle, moved by such a harsh fate,
Could not hold itself up and drooped against a wall;
The sycamore dried out suddenly,
Leaving the trunk without branch or leaf.
The holly, full of despair, as soon as it was approached,
Pricked out of grief anything that touched it.
The apricot tree was covered in a black humour;
The pear tree bore no pears all year round;
The yew, beloved guest of this charming place,
Was stunted, and has not grown since this sad day;
The marigolds and the poppies went silent,
The jasmine all dying fell into graves,
The carnations and the lilies, aggrieved at this death,
Languished sadly, sleeping on the ground:
Everything seemed to mourn this cruel death.
All of Paris regretted this faithful animal,
But nothing matched on this day the profound grief
Felt by Palmis in her very great misfortune.

Third Canto

Tender chameleon, animal full of charm,
Your death has cost precious tears!
And how often have great Kings been buried,
And yet not been mourned by such beautiful eyes?

38 This is a Mulberry tree, associated with Pyramus and Thisbe in ancient Greek and Roman mythology as they planned to meet underneath it to elope, as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*.

So it was for the dear sparrow of the good-natured Lesbia,³⁹
 When the Fates long ago took his life;
 Everyone mourned his lot, and lyre in hand,
 Catullus made all the people of Rome cry.
 But once this initial grief has been expressed,
 The dead deserve our supreme duty:
 And that, as is the custom, we usher to a tomb
 Those whom death condemns to eternal night.
 Palmis wanted with such a funeral convoy
 To render the procession immortal and forever famous,
 And for insects, birds, quadrupeds, fish,
 And all beings of all shapes and sizes,
 To gather to form this magnificent convoy
 And swell out the numbers of this public ceremony.
 O you who hear me with astonishment,
 You seem struck by such enchantment!
 This feat seems incomprehensible to you:
 But when Palmis commands it, is nothing impossible?
 Has she not a hundred times created, in an instance,
 Towns, palaces and charming chateaux?
 And with her powerful hand so rich in miracles,
 Has she not a hundred times conjured such spectacles?
 So many famous heroes, so vaunted in the past,
 Clélie and Cyrus whom she brought back to life,
 Have they not received from her a more noble life,
 Than the ones that fate once took from them?⁴⁰
 Has she not countless times led
 Our enraptured imaginations to the middle of combat?
 But rather than guide you again to dreadful battles,
 Palmis wants to show you an illustrious funeral ceremony,
 She wants you to see it in detail here,
 You who are incredulous, come, listen and believe.

39 In Catullus 2, the Roman poet laments the death of the sparrow belonging to his lover, Lesbia: this poem is often read erotically with the sparrow standing for virginity.

40 Clélie refers to the eponymous heroine of Scudéry's novel, *Clélie*; and Cyrus to Cyrus the Great, the hero of her *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*.

Pharaohs once in arid deserts
Raised to the sky enormous pyramids,
Massive structures which seemed to stir
Respect for erstwhile Kings, even in confused spectators.
The prudent Palmis believed, according to the custom
Of the ancient Egyptians, people once so wise,
That the chameleon that she had so loved,
Should be buried in the far-off fields,
And that Atys,⁴¹ a charming place, a place full of greenery,
Would be an appropriate space for the tomb.
As soon as Atys was chosen as the burial place,
Following Palmis' order, the diligent crow
Flew to address this funeral convoy.
The crow, as everyone knows, is a famous crier,
One who, generation after generation, always clad in black,
Is perfectly well-suited to this sad duty.
This crier then went croaking through the streets,
And with an awful voice, piercing to the clouds,
Convoked the animals of Paris,
Then those that Versailles and Madrid had gathered.
All having been invited, all confirmed their attendance to the
crow,
And all joined the convoy the next day.
But the body, which had been carried outside the walls of the
vast city,
In secret the previous evening,
Was immediately circled by the lugubrious and threatening
osprey,
Who with piercing cry so often scares us;
And the sad owls, who come out at night,
Made a terrible sound around his body.
When dawn returned these night-time birds
Withdrew all confused and taciturn,
Resolved from now on to no longer love the day,
Which such a rare animal himself had disdained.

41 Atys, as is later glossed in the margin, refers to the abode of Valentin Conrart.

But as soon as the sun, father of light,
Came to resume his daily task,
From Conflans to near the Faubourgs,
Stretched the marvellous concourse of millions of animals:
Their troupe, wandering and immense,
Seemed almost to represent the birth of the world.
Palmis, with one glance, got them in order,
And then she said to them, "Go" and everyone went.
In the first rank went the sad turtledoves,
Then the pheasants with colours so beautiful and vivid,
The partridges, the plovers and other birds
Who charm in turn the Coteaux Palace.
After them were the magnificent troops
Of swans, herons, and water birds,
The swans sang with the sad voice
They use when in despair.
Following them in solemn attire
Were all those adorned with superb plumage:
The egret and the bustard and the extraordinary bird
Who was once a man with a hundred eyes.⁴²
After them came the rare-winged creatures
From faraway and barbaric lands,
The ostrich with a huge body, the pelicans,
The bird of Numidia and the white tails.
Then a flock of magpies followed
All well matched in suitable mourning attire,
And a thousand parrots spouting, as they went along,
Half words and sad exclamations!
The charming warbler so widely praised,
Whose voice was heard with respect,
Was flying from rank to rank, alone conducting them all
And maintaining order from one end to the other.
Every winged animal followed the same path,
Although there were no birds of prey in sight,
As these had been quite sensibly placed elsewhere,

42 Argus: see note 10 above.

Out of fear for the trouble they would cause.
But in their place were countless cicadas
Singing by day and night.
The people were surprised by what they saw,
When they were suddenly struck by a more beautiful sight:
They saw six beautiful steeds along the Seine,
Pulling with noble and proud step an ebony chariot,
Carrying a crystal coffin gleaming brightly,
In which lay the body of the illustrious animal.
And the wise Palmis, always judicious,
And who led this orderly ceremony with such skill,
Had chosen, to accompany this coffin,
Winged animals in mourning attire:
The sombre moorhen, the blackbird and the crow,
All with black feathers and similar dress.
Following the body could be seen
Quadrupeds full of sadness and grief,
First those from the fields of burning Africa
Accompanied the magnificent elephant,
Which, mournful, was walking more slowly
Than a sombre senator at a funeral.
The leopard, the tiger and two terrible lions
Followed, as docile as peaceful sheep,
Their grief having softened them
Or perhaps they had just looked at Philis.
The Barbary cat miaowing endlessly
Was next to express extreme grief.
African monkeys and she-monkeys —
Portraits, or rather, mimics of humans —
Followed, but they were overcome by such pensiveness
That they seemed to have foregone all monkeying around.
When the animals had thus passed,
Each one according to the rank they had been placed in,
The bear, fully covered by a hideous robe,
Appeared in this procession with a terrible expression;
As a mark of his extreme languor
He had let his hair grow to a horrible length.

The fox walked more than one league behind him,
 All thoughtful and dragging everywhere his long tail.
 The squirrel seemed to be in a hurry,
 And then the hedgehog followed, prickles extended.
 Next followed a thousand dogs, all gathered expressly,
 Howling along the whole route.
 And, the whole way, madly suffering,⁴³
 It was evident how much they were afflicted.
 Then came a hundred lambs with their black woollen coats,
 Bleating more sadly than one could ever believe.
 Then the mole followed, walking so dolefully
 That she saw nothing of her surroundings.
 The marmot was also present,
 But, having fallen into a grief-stricken torpor,
 Prompted alarm, as people
 Feared that she would not revive for six months.
 Next the turtle and the beaver — more lively —
 Offered their condolences on behalf of all amphibians,
 And the beaver became most tender,
 Even though he was raised among the Hurons.⁴⁴
 But the turtle, walking a measured pace,
 Proceeded as slowly as an officer of state.
 After this could be seen thick crawling slugs,
 And ants and crickets and thousands of glow-worms —
 Nature's miniature stars —
 Which light up earth in dark nights.
 As for the grieving fish, they were led through the water
 Towards Atys, by a barbel fish.
 The other animals also stopped there,
 And never did even the boldest enter into Atys.⁴⁵

43 The French has 'enragés' which can literally mean 'rabid' for dogs but also has the sense of furious and also to be wild with suffering as in the definition in the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*: 'Enrager, se dit fig. d'Une douleur excessive que l'on souffre avec impatience' [Enrager, is used figuratively to mean an excessive grief that one suffers impatiently.]

44 On this, see the Introduction, p. 3.

45 This is glossed in the margin as 'the house of M. Conrart': it was at Valentin Conrart's residence that the chameleon was dissected.

It is unclear why, but one of them let on
That beasts never go into this famous place.
But in their stead, there was a large assembly,
All of Parnassus in a procession:
The nine muses, the Graces, Cupids,
Formed in this place a superb cortege.
To receive the body, they all advanced first,
And the Muses walked in the first line,
Leading in their train many celebrated writers,
Once famous in Rome or famous in Paris.
Apollo, protector of the nine sisters,
Did not preside over them as he normally did:
He was still in the sacred Valley of the Muses,
But Theodamas took Apollo's place:⁴⁶
The great Theodamas famous for his wisdom,
And for his patience and his politeness,
And for all these great talents which raise
Earthly mortals to the heights of the gods.
After the learned sisters, appeared the three Graces,
Accompanied by a thousand beauties,
In particular, she who was taken for a Grace —
Iris — who wins over a new heart every time she laughs,
But now crying with great charm,
Moved people instead by her tears.
Then on the shores of the Garonne and the Rhone
There appeared a swarm of little brunette Cupids;
All the blond Cupids, assembled instead on the banks of the
Seine,
Appeared with their ebony bows.
Each one wore a black blindfold,
And was adorned with crows' wings.
A thousand tender lovers of all species,
The wise, those moved by their mistresses,
The sorrowful, the mischievous, the great and the small,
Followed them step by step into Atys's residence,

46 Theodamus is glossed in the margin as 'M. Conrart'.

Which in an instant adorned by fairies
 With torches, garlands, urns and trophies,
 And sculptures carved by Le Bruns'⁴⁷ industrious art,
 Charmed the gaze.
 Once the magnificent coffin had been lifted under the dais,
 To the sound of a mournful chant,
 And once the spectators were all placed
 On the different seats especially set out,
 Gravely Melpomene,⁴⁸ in her famous beautiful verse,
 Delivered the great chameleon's funeral oration.
 Then, having passed under sombre cypress trees,
 Which seemed to have been brought there for this purpose,
 The body was placed into a rustic vault,
 Onto which was placed an antique obelisk,
 And at the bottom was engraved this epitaph,
 The inventive work of the great Theodamas,
 Who, to soothe a little his pressing sadness,
 Made his eloquent grief speak thus:
 "Stop, you who pass, from going further,
 You owe this place the respect of your tears.
 The beautiful chameleon is nothing more than ash,
 He who was so noble, rare and tender;
 No longer await his changes of colour,
 Death cannot alter its initial feelings.
 His body lies in this place,
 But his faithful spirit has chosen eternal rest with Palmis,
 It sees her, follows her, listens to her speak,
 Farewell, passer-by, let these words console you."
 Then the Muses returned to Palmis' abode,
 The Graces and Cupids followed them there,
 And the rest returned to Paris,
 And spoke of the chameleon everywhere,
 Saying, as they sighed endlessly, on their way, that

47 Charles le Brun (1619–90) was a painter, known for having designed the décor for Versailles.

48 Melpomene was one of the nine muses; she was the muse of tragedy and lyre playing.

He loved Palmis so much that he died of tenderness,
And the sad echo repeated this refrain:
He loved Palmis so much that he died of love.

"It must be said," commented Zénobie, "that this poem is ingenious. This marvellous chameleon compares very well even to someone as deserving as Voiture," she added with a smile, "whose funeral oration did him less honour than the one we just heard delivered for the chameleon."⁴⁹

"What you say so eloquently in prose," replied Bérénice, "was gallantly expressed in verse by a friend Palmis and I share. Here is what he says: he is talking to the chameleon:⁵⁰

Is there anything more famous
Than the great funeral
With which Damon honours you today?
Perhaps in the underworld,
There are two beautiful and gallant shades
Feeling some regret.
Yes, I think that in this adventure,
He has made both Sarrasin and Voiture jealous:
Voiture of you and Sarrasin of Damon."

"This is very pleasant," said Amérinte, "but it seems to me that the same person who wrote this madrigal also wrote another on learning that the mistress of the chameleon had written the chameleon's story."

"I know that one," replied Bérénice, "it is also addressed to the chameleon."

You will live forever in the Temple of Memory;
Sapho offers you a place in her divine writing;
Her hand, so skilled in distributing prized virtues,
Will trace your pleasant history.

49 Vincent Voiture (1597–1648) was a prominent and influential poet and a key model for Scudéry's 'galant' poetry: poems written in short, social, playful modes. He was also an important member of the Marquise de Rambouillet's circle. Jean-François Sarasin wrote a burlesque valedictory poem 'Le pompe funèbre de Voiture' (1649), which this three-canto poem imitates.

50 'M. Genest' (Charles-Claude Genest) is glossed in the margin as author of this poem.

Your pictures adorn rooms everywhere;
 Everywhere in gilded frames
 An ingenious painter has placed his rich canvasses;
 Never did the fate of an animal shine so:
 Even those who are transformed into the stars above
 Have a less illustrious fortune.

"This is another very gallant piece," said Méliton, "but I have seen a longer work by the same hand which also seemed to me very beautiful."

"I will keep that one back as the last thing I show you," replied Bérénice. "My friend found that it praises her excessively, so she would not have shown it to us if it had not already been seen because it was printed with other works. Now, though, I will show you the work of a lady who is named in the first canto of the poem we read earlier."

After saying this, Bérénice took out one of the papers that she had placed in a tidy case and read the following:

Epitaph for the Chameleon⁵¹

In this place lies the tomb
 Of one who was surprised by death;
 You who pass: learn first of his adventure
 Before pitying his fate.

It is to Egypt that he owes his birth,
 But an ambitious desire
 Made him abandon this place
 As soon as he was old enough.

His ancestors, glorious and renowned,
 Kings of the changeable chameleon
 Traced their history
 To the first Pharaohs.

When this state was conquered
 By Alexander the great conqueror
 "I was by his side," said one of them:

51 A marginal note attributes this to 'Mme de Plabuisson'.

"I witnessed his valour."

"Cleopatra who was so beautiful,"
Said another, just as glorious,
"Always kept me close to her
And I had the good fortune of pleasing her."

These great names of Kings and Queens
Revered from father to son,
Made him despise the plains
From which rose the city of Memphis.

"The illustrious place of my birth
Which," he said, "once had so much renown,
Is now only the recompense
Of a barbarian Pasha without a name."⁵²

His little heroic courage
Made him restless:
He abandoned his native Africa;
He cannot live without heroes.

He brings with him his faithful companion
She was a present from Cupid;
Without her he would never
Have found his stay as pleasant.

With the same animated ardour
She followed him and Chance
Introduced them to Renown
Who was resting nearby.

"Where," they said, "are these great men
Of whom you dare boast everywhere?
Although we are but little animals
We want to live with them."

52 Egypt was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1517 and governed by a series of 'Pashas' (an honorific to designate a high rank in the Ottoman political and military system).

"Go," said Renown, "go to France:
This Empire is so flourishing
That day by day its power
Makes that of the Crescent tremble."⁵³

The great Prince so revered there,
And so feared everywhere else,
Has joined to the beautiful art of pleasing
The most august majesty.

Shall I tell you the advantages
That the French name possesses?
Among the French we find more wise people
Than encountered long ago in Greece.

The Greek Sappho, so renowned,
Who once shone with glory
Was never held in as much esteem
As the Sappho of their country.

Both of you, come onto my wings
And I will carry you to France
And if you are faithful to each other
I will give you to Sappho."

They took this unexpected transport,
Impatient to arrive in Paris;
Sappho received them with joy:
They were her little favourites.

At the home of this charming mistress
They spent their happiest days,
But fortune is inconstant
And one cannot be happy forever.

Death, that heartless goddess,
Source of so much mourning,
Followed always by grief,

53 The crescent is the symbol of the Ottoman Empire.

Hastened one of them to a coffin.

Sapho cried with anger,
Hiding the living one in her breast,
"For me, it is nothing
To tear the dead from your hand."

There was a consequence to this threat:
She immediately ordered
The entire Empire of Parnassus
To remove him from the tomb.

Two days later, out of the black wave,
Or rather from this unnecessary tomb,
He was seen to emerge, full of glory:
More brilliant and more beautiful.

Egypt gave him life,
France tore him from Death,
To which of them, France or his homeland,
Will he give thanks for his fate?

"This poem is most inventive and very pleasant," said Zénobie. "But it does not impart anything of the imagination of the amiable person who wrote it, which does not have that sort of character. Instead, it reveals more about the beautiful things that the public does not know because her modesty prevents her from showing them. But now Bérénice must reveal the rest of what she intended to show us."

"Regarding the verse that I will read you first," replied Bérénice, "I will not divulge the name of the person who wrote it, although he has distinguished merit.⁵⁴ Since he is currently occupied in work that affords him a greater and more solid glory than that which these sorts of amusements could furnish, I hardly dare to give you the chance to guess who he is. Listen, then, to this poem with a tranquil mind and without curiosity."

"I would," said Meliton, "consider betraying your secret, if I were not afraid of angering you, because I am convinced that this poem is

54 Paul Pellisson.

by an upstanding man of good reputation and countenance, who was exceedingly gallant in his early youth and who could still be so if he wanted to; he is secure in the virtues he possesses, extremely capable, with lively and animated eloquence when the occasion requires, and has an ardent zeal for the King, as well as for the mistress of the chameleon."

"Ah, Meliton," interrupted Bérénice, "don't say anymore and listen instead to the poem; I will never betray the modesty of my friends."

The Chameleon

I was born on the banks of this superb river
Which takes pride in its seasonal floods:
When other rivers spread gently onto the grass
And take pleasure in doing so calmly,
The Nile, overpowering thousands of obstacles,
Extends its incredible reach with its mighty course.
It surprises reason, it stuns the eyes,
Its waters are nothing short of miraculous.

One day, walking in the fresh air,
Under the cover of a rock, beneath thick foliage,
I saw a stranger who had come to this river in order
To admire the beauty of the bank.
"Yes, despite the beauty of the Nile,
Long live the Seine," he said.
"At least, beneath its crystal waters,
It does not sustain these perfidious weepers,
These groaning monsters,
Whose faithless tears
Pitilessly attract the pity of passers-by
Into its mortal traps.

In Paris there is a maiden known to the world,
Whose qualities are so rare
That Egypt would once have
Placed her in the highest rank of the divinities."
I approached the foreigner, keen to hear him,
I followed him, I listened to him,

When looking at me, he saw that I was neither
Poised to attack him or preparing to defend myself,
He let me join him and I was delighted,
Because what I had just learnt
Meant that I would have followed him
Even if he had not wanted my company.

Grateful to be in such good hands,
Without any resistance
I willingly increased his entourage
Without adding any expense.
For we chameleons
Travel at minimal expense
And any cost we do incur
Is never paid for by our host.

We arrived in the places,
Where the Seine reveals
The various beauties of so many sights:
Palaces and gardens border its banks,
Thousands of boats carrying riches
Adorn it with their treasures.

But among such a variety of beauties
The river does not owe its unparalleled destiny
To such richness, but to
The waves as they
Wash the Palace of the Sun.

Carried down the ever-pleasant bank,
I was brought to this residence
Whose incomparable Mistress —
According to what I have been told — makes immortal
Whatever she loves,
And this seemed to me to be believable.

As soon as I was received into her apartments
I thought I had reached eternal life,
So pure and tranquil was the air I experienced there:

People from the court, people from the town
 Everyone, in search of refining themselves, visited,
 And everyone left more refined still.

My little soul was delighted
 But since my temperament
 Ceaselessly urges me to change,
 Despite my delight
 I followed my habit so far as to change my life's course.
 Knowing that heroes live on after their death,
 In the expectation of a similar fate,
 I died, and ceased to be,
 Certain that my death would make me better known,
 And, being reborn in posterity,
 That Sapho would make me
 Greater than I would have been.

Sapho, whose delightful and enduring poems
 Have brought their charms to our lands,
 Will erect a monument to me
 More solid than the pyramids,
 More precious than gold and diamonds.

The rarest animals
 Among both civilised and barbarous people
 Die without hope of return;
 Elephants, lions, panthers,
 Rhinoceros and dromedaries
 All fall into obscurity
 When they die.
 But as for me, since Sapho works for my glory
 And divine Apollo
 Engraves her words on the Temple of Memory,
 I am certain that history
 Will talk about the chameleon.

"This poem, whose author you do not want to name, is certainly full of new ideas," said Meliton. "There is even something very novel about its design and it is full of wit."

"I am so afraid," interrupted Bérénice, "that you might say too much that I beg you to skip over all the praise the author merits and instead to listen to a fragment from a longer verse epistle by the same hand as the author of the funeral oration and whose verse, I find, is beautifully written."

To M. de S., On the Death of her Chameleon

Epistle

Sapho, who would have dared to believe,
That, at the peak of his glory,
Méléon⁵⁵ would die?
And who would have thought
That in the places where everyone
Usually finds a rich source
Of pure immortality,
That this highly regarded animal
Would have suffered at the criminal hand
Of the cruel Fates?
But bringing the dead back to life
Is no effort for you:
You can, despite their desire,
Return life to him,
And you know that the Fates
Can do nothing to stop you.
Sapho: his faithful love,
His agreeable nature, his zeal,
And the voyage undertaken
from Alexandria to Paris
Deserve this miracle.
Do not, therefore, raise any objections:
Take hold of your pen and without delay
Bring the dead creature back to life.
To obtain this grace

55 Marginal note: 'this is what he was called'.

Do I need to trace
 All the sudden changes
 That you found so charming?
 Or in epic verse,
 Search old chronicles
 For whether the right to divinity
 Was granted to his forebears?
 Sapho, these are not fables:
 Delightful chameleons —
 As it was passed down from father to son —
 Were the gods of Memphis.
 On these renowned banks
 Where the Ptolemies⁵⁶ reigned,
 These glorious animals
 Were worshipped everywhere:
 In ancient paintings
 In the magnificent temples,
 At the feet of chameleons
 You can see the Pharaohs.
 Méléon, unlike his forebears,
 Did not see all these mysteries,
 Nor Egypt on its knees,
 For Méléon was with you,
 And to listen to you at every opportunity,
 He was in your home
 Where he spent thousands of
 Pleasant, charming moments:
 This, in my view, is cause enough
 For an Apotheosis.

“You are right,” said Periandre to Bérénice, “to say that this poem is well written; and it is also evident that it possesses the character of the hand which wrote it.”

56 The Ptolomaic Dynasty was a long-reigning royal house which ruled the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt from 305BCE to 30CE.

"Here is a sonnet," said Bérénice, "by the author of the poem about Charlemagne,⁵⁷ and who was another admirer of the Chameleons."

The Chameleons to Sapho

A Sonnet

Your virtue and your knowledge
Have an admirable power;
Sapho, to see you
We left Africa, the land of our birth.

Changing as we do from white to black,
We have been accused of inconstancy,
But you must surely have
Other chameleons in France.

Our bodies are almost all spirit,
A little sun nourishes us
It animates and inspires us.

And we come to live *chez vous*
Because the air breathed there
Is the purest of all.

"Clearly," said Zénobie, "the author of this sonnet knows how to write verse: but please, out of kindness, would you show us the one we talked about first."

"Here it is," said Bérénice, "but do not ask me for more, for I have only chosen this one, although I have at least as many left. I have even forgotten, thoughtlessly, the poem by the illustrious Mademoiselle de la Vigne, who on another occasion wrote such a beautiful ode in praise of the owner of the chameleon, and which she sent to her so gallantly that everyone knew about it."⁵⁸

57 Marginal note: 'M. le Laboureur'. Louis le Laboureur (1615–79) was an author and poet and wrote the poem, *Charlemagne*, in 1664.

58 Anne de la Vigne (1634–84) was a poet and friend of Scudéry's.

The whole group complained about Bérénice, but they had to be happy with her wishes. At length, she read the following poem.

The Chameleons

to M. De S.

From the renowned banks of the proud river
Which sees in its marvellous course
The pyramids and the lighthouse,⁵⁹
From the banks of the Nile, which the angry heavens
Places under a barbarous sceptre,
We come to this place to find a sweeter fate,
And confess to everyone
That of all that Egypt has that is great and rare,
It has nothing that is as great as you.

Although we are only feeble animals,
We have ambition
And we follow the most praiseworthy passion
Of the greatest men.
From the depths of Asia, from the depths of Africa,
Hearing proclaimed the magnificent
Grandeur, the glory, and the happiness of the French Empire,
Already one of our species
Undertook the noble and bold task
Of going to France to admire the most perfect of Kings.

We both contemplated a similar voyage,
But in a foreign clime,
We were seeking a hand that would protect us,
And which deserved our praise;
When on the banks of a stream, under thick palm trees,
Illustrious Africans, sheltered by this shade,
Praised Sapho for her noble and wise mind,

⁵⁹ The lighthouse of Alexandria was completed by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (280–247 BCE). It is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Her great heart so full of shining virtues,
And to better convey her marvellous image
Recited, in their language,
The stories of Clélie and of Cyrus.

"Oh gods," they cried, "what lively descriptions!
What variety of noble sentiments,
As various as a chameleon's transformations!
Their diverse tints take on hundreds of colours
Just as this divine genius, by changing goals,
Appears to us in different guises:
Philosopher, gentleman, warrior and politician,
Into anything it chooses it can transform,
And everywhere elevated, brilliant, tender and heroic,
It always knows how to instruct; it always knows how to
charm.

It is," they continued, "this admirable maiden
Whose incomparable eloquence
Thrills hearts and minds;
She is the one of whom Europe has boasted victory
And who, wanting to offer glory to the heavens,
Of a new glory has won the prize."

They painted the portrait of your whole life
And as soon as our delighted souls
Burnt with desire to see you,
We braved Thetis' violence.⁶⁰
And from Egypt to France,
We both lived for this single hope.
But we have nothing more to fear;
We find at your feet a destiny full of charm,
Even the rigours of death
Could not now cause us to complain.
And despite death's inhuman endeavour,
We await, at your hand,

60 Thetis is a goddess of the sea in Greek mythology.

The immorality that you will afford us;
This heart, so magnanimous, so tender and so good,
Which makes all cry for the death of a pigeon⁶¹
Can do as much for a chameleon.

"This poem," said Meliton, "is so well executed that opinion cannot be divided."

"You are right," said Amérinte, "and I found this verse even more beautiful than when I saw it for the first time."

"In truth," said Bérénice, "if you knew how difficult it was for me to get this poem from the person for whom it was written, you would be grateful to me, for she is always afraid that one might blame those who praise her. She also counts the greatest praises simply as great compliments — it is not by this route that one wins her friendship."

The whole group thanked Bérénice for having told them the true story of the chameleon which contains many curious things that one cannot find in anything else written about them, ancient or modern; they also thanked her for then having so amiably entertained everyone by reading this inventive poem and for the diversity of the many other works on the same subject.

61 This is a reference to the cycle of pigeon poems in the manuscript material, see in particular pp. 154–160.

Manuscript Animals

MS 'Conrart' 5420.1, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France

pp. 119-126¹

Chameleons

Epitaph for Sapho's Chameleon

It is the Chameleon speaking

Passerby, here is the whole story
Of my misfortune and my glory.
Sapho, this glorious name,
Known and respected far and wide
Was renowned even in the land
Where, according to Nature's wishes, I was born.
To see her, I crossed seas,
I breathed a hundred types of air,
And of all, I prefer
That which they breathe in France.

I came here with a parrot,
Admirable for his chatter;
Being able to use his tongue
It was he who did the talking.
Everyone praised him so much

1 The subtitles 'Chameleons', 'Pigeons', 'Turtledoves and More Pigeons' and 'Warblers' are my own; the poem titles are as given in the manuscripts; I have included asterisks within sequences where they are present in the manuscripts.

That I felt miserable,
 But, despite this preference,
 Sapho avoided favouritism.
 The parrot had the good fortune,
 As ambassador,
 To receive her first caress.
 I also shared her tenderness
 And was the best treated of all.
 My bright eyes, my sweet glances,²
 Were full of tears at first
 When my heroine judged my small figure
 Worthy of a favourable welcome;
 But this honour was my downfall.

Seeing, not without some bitterness,
 My companion's stroke of good luck,
 — for he was already treated as a sweetheart —
 Vanity put it into my head
 That he is only a beast like me,
 And that since he can speak thus
 I might be able to speak well too.

Encouraged by this frivolous error
 Of possessing the gift of speech,
 From a timid chameleon
 I became proud like a lion.
 And I thought, through my eloquence,
 To show my gratitude
 To Sapho, who sustained me,
 For the favours I received,
 That the parrot's speech
 Would no longer be his advantage
 And that, in a word, if I chatted well,
 I would have nothing more to fear.

With this in mind, I listened carefully,
 At the foot of his cage, I watched,

2 'mon naturel' is written above 'mes regards', translated here as 'my glances'.

And I studied incessantly
 What he did naturally.
 But, in the end, all my effort
 Proved useless and futile,
 No matter how much I tried
 I could not say a word
 To praise my dear mistress.
 And tenderness and sadness
 Caused so much effort in my heart
 That I had to concede to death.

* * * * *

The Chameleon to Sapho

If I was not able, during my life
 To express how much I loved you,
 My love, after my death,
 Sapho, has served as my voice.
 Generous Queen of Tender
 Your sighs re-animate my ashes
 And Destiny herself has permitted
 Your dear and tender friends,
 In lending me their voices, to give me³
 What I had so desired;
 And their immortal verse crowns
 Your name and mine in immortality.

* * * * *

Epitaph for the Chameleon [This is the same as the one above from 'The Story of Two Chameleons' so I will not reprint it here; it is signed 'Madame de Plabuisson'].

pp. 209-212

3 These are the friends who wrote the poems printed with 'The Story of Two Chameleons' and referenced in the first canto of the poem, 'Le Caméléon', p. 125.

Pigeons

Petition⁴ for the dead hen-pigeon⁵

Sire, a poor hen-pigeon
 Innocent, frank, and good,
 Expects, at the very least, from you
 That which the Filoux have taken:
 A few moments of audience,
 Not to demand revenge.
 Obedient to the orders of the heavens,
 The pigeon looks upon, her heart without bitterness,
 The jealous creature whose envy
 Deprived her of life.
 Nor has she come here
 With an ambitious concern
 To charm all ears
 With a great account of your marvels;
 A swan, on the edge of a tomb,
 Does not possess as sweet a song,
 And if he wanted to try to compete
 He would have to concede.
 With few words, charming Prince,
 A monument in her honour can be made.

4 'Placet' (here 'Petition') is legal term in French usually referring to a request or petition made to the King. This poem is also included in Paul Pellisson, *Œuvres diverses de M. Pellisson*, 2 vols (Didot, 1735), I, pp. 147–49 where it has the sub-heading: 'M. Pellisson at the Bastille presented this petition in the name of Sapho's hen-pigeon.' See also Michèle Rosellini, 'Pourquoi écrire des poèmes en prison ? Le cas de Paul Pellisson à la Bastille', *Les Dossiers du Grihl*, 5-1 (2011), <http://journals.openedition.org/dossiersgrihl/4939>, who suggests dating this poem and the next to the end of 1664.

5 A marginal note reads: 'He [Pellisson] wrote these two poems about a placet someone told him about which circulated for the Thieves and some others about Mlle de Scudéry's pigeon killed by a little jealous dog.' 'Thieves' possibly refers to the 'filoux': literally, 'thieves', but also, familiarly, 'mischievous ones', which refers to another cycle of playful poems from 1664: see *Mademoiselle de Scudéry: sa vie et sa correspondance*, eds, E. J. B. Rathéry and Boutron (Techener, 1873), pp. 511–15, where they are quoted; see also Nathalie Grande, 'Une Scudéry fantastique: *Das Fräulein von Scudery* d'E.T.A. Hoffmann et ses adaptations pour la scène', in *Madeleine de Scudéry : une femme de lettres au xviiie siècle*, ed. by Delphine Denis and Anne-Élisabeth Spica (Artois Presses Université, 2002), pp. 293–306.

But we are all eagerly awaiting
A man, by the name of Acante,⁶
A man of many professions
Well known to both financiers,
And to poets,
Who makes the warblers speak.⁷
A man who can immortalise the pigeon,
Who can (and this is very bold —
I don't know if we should believe it)
Even add to your glory.
We know he has been detained;
Until his arrival,
The pigeon wanders about without a tomb
And with her little murmur,
Full of boldness
She troubles your Majesty.
Sire, if you please,
Give her over to the acclaim of Parnassus;
The whole host of birds
Will sing new songs about her:
Swans, Nightingales, Warblers,
In their most secret pain,
After such success,
Will supplicate you,
Singing as far as the poles:
"The King can do anything, with just a word;
Let us love him with a vanquished heart,
And wish misfortune to his enemies."
The most savage birds of prey
Half in fear, half in joy,
Will have recourse to supplications,
And before long
We will see them come, Sire,
Accompanied even by the Imperial Eagle.

6 Paul Pellisson was imprisoned from 1661–66.

7 Marginal note: 'The warbler is a work by Paul Pellisson, written under the name of Acante.'

* * * * *

The Hen-Pigeon

When the hen-pigeon, in a desperate state,⁸
 Learnt the inflexible laws
 That spare no-one
 Sapho, with tender speech,
 Said, "Weep, loves,
 Weep for the pleasant pigeon."

All the Menages, and the Gombauds,⁹
 With loud and loving song,
 Resounding everywhere,
 Summoned to her aid,
 Repeated, "Weep, loves,
 Weep for the pleasant pigeon."

In the little enchanted wood
 The bird we have so praised,¹⁰
 Despite the harsh winter that stuns her,
 Sings, in the sweetest tone,
 "Weep, loves, with us,
 Weep for the pleasant pigeon."

Tenderness,¹¹ with charming eyes,
 Cries out at every occasion,
 "Farewell, forever, Mignonne,¹²
 May all the jealous ones perish,

8 'Desperate state': the expression in French, 'être aux abois', is humourous here as it literally refers to being surrounded by a hunting pack of dogs (and it is a dog which kills this pigeon) but is also used figuratively. This poem is also included in Pellisson, *Œuvres diverses*, I, p. 141–47, with a different title: 'On the death of a hen-pigeon that Sapho loved and that she had named 'Mignonne''.

9 Other friends and writers: Gilles Ménage (1613–92) and Jean Ogier de Gombauld (1576–1666).

10 Marginal note: 'the warbler who returned every year to this little wood is famous for the poems written about her.'

11 Marginal note: 'This refers to the Empire of Tender'.

12 Marginal note: 'Mignonne was her name.'

Weep, loves, with us
Weep for the pleasant pigeon."

Touched by these sweet tones,
Venus and her dear children
Open her ivory coffin
And transform her into a new star,¹³
Which shines in the sky,
As beautifully as it does in history.

Even in this glorious state
She still misses her home —
Wonders of a faithful heart!
And with a hundred little movements
Agitating her trembling fires
She believes she is still beating her wings.

Still her tender love
Longs to return,
Still desire presses her
To fly to the breast
And to eat from the hand
Of her charming mistress.

The swan, with silver fires,
Showing off thousands of beauties,
Comes to offer her frank advice,
But, oh unfortunate swan,
Her little mutinous heart
Either hates your fires or disdains them.

The eagle, more imperious,¹⁴
Wishes the pigeon's stay in the heavens
To console and soothe her;
But for an enamoured heart,

13 Marginal note: 'We have just discovered a comet that many think is a new star.' This refers to the Great Comet that appeared from October 1664 through to January 1665.

14 Marginal note: 'The swan and the eagle are two constellations.'

Beyond being able to love or be loved,
Is not everything frivolous?

"Sapho alone charms me,
Sapho alone enflames me,"
Says she, "Alas, what pleasure it is
To scare with my fires
The unfortunate astrologer
Or the idle multitude!"

Pigeon, console yourself,
A King, indeed the greatest King
Ever to be cherished or feared
(Apollo boasted of him)
Will praise your fidelity
And will lament your fate.

Oh, that young heroes
Keen to rest,
Out of the same fidelity,
Will go once again
To spread the French name
In foreign nations!

You have seen it, Proud Crescent,¹⁵
That which defied the whole world:
Their thundering legion
Came to stop your destiny,
And made of a trembling Germany
A mere trophy.¹⁶

15 Marginal note: 'Allusion to the Thundering Legion, famous in history, and composed of Christians, who were given this name by a pagan emperor after a miraculous victory against the barbarians. The legion was made up of six or seven thousand men.' The Thundering legion was a name conferred by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 174 CE to the Christian twelfth division of his army who ensured defeat of the Quadi, a Germanic people.

16 The great-Vizier Ahmed Köprülü had invaded Habsburg-ruled Hungary and Moravia in 1663, prompting retaliation by the army of Holy Roman Empire, which included France. French troops assisted the Austrians against the Ottoman army in the Battle of Saint-Gothard in 1664 and this seemed to catch the imagination of the Parisian literary scene. See Niderst, p. 464. Louis XIV and France would go on to

What noise! What bloodshed!
 One, in wounding the one who wounded him,
 Sates his noble desire;
 The other dies in his flag,¹⁷
 And if he takes it with him to the tomb
 He considers life of little value.

French people, it is too obvious,
 Ah, the desperate barbarian
 Seeks, in vain, forts and rivers;
 I see his stunned eyes
 And the great name of Louis
 Marches before our banners.

The Pacha, full of valour,
 Abandons himself to grief,
 And the Vizier, pale and wan,
 Ready to make an attempt on his life
 Appeals to Muhammad for help,
 Implores and blasphemes him.

"Prophet, or cowardly imposter,
 If you are neither feeble nor a liar,"
 Says he, "who obliges you to pretend?
 Is this not enough bloodshed?
 Ah, the time has come and so has the Frankish King,¹⁸
 From whom we have so much to fear!"

Muse, you are flying too high:
 You shouldn't be aiming for such things,
 I like the ardour which compels you,
 I would like to convey you to such heights;
 But who has made you forget
 Your pigeon and your weakness?

have an informal alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

17 Marginal note: 'something similar happened in this battle.'

18 Marginal note: 'They call us 'Franks' and they have a prophecy that threatens that a French king will open Muhammad's tomb and disperse his bones.'

In vain, you cherish my King
 The laurel is not for you,
 It is enough to be gallant
 And that after my sad days,
 To say, "Weep, loves,
 Weep for the amorous Acante."

* * * * *

p. 424

The Tomb of Sapho's Hen-Pigeon

Stop here, passerby, I am a hen-pigeon:
 If I speak today from this sad tomb,
 This voice which love affords me
 Is only for recounting my sorrows.

The divine Sapho loved me while I was alive
 Her sighs and weeping followed my death;
 My destiny is worthy of envy,
 But still may I not lament?

A little dog, jealous of my supreme happiness,
 With his cruel paw ended my fate;
 And it is from my extreme love,
 That I had expected death.

My care and my love pleased my mistress
 She alone was my joy, she alone my concern:
 I lived solely for her tenderness,
 Why should I not also die from it?

Turtledoves and More Pigeons

MS 'Conrart' 5420.2, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France

pp. 1159–91.

The Story of the Turtledoves

On New Year's Day, a gardener gave me the most beautiful bouquet of orange blossom as a New Year's gift. I sent it to Madame de Plabuisson¹⁹ and an hour later she sent me a large pâté wrapped in hay, just like a duck pâté from Picardy. I received this gift and believed it to be a real pâté. Agelaste and one other friend,²⁰ who were with me at the time, were as deceived as I was. All that remained was for us to guess what type of pâté it was. I opened the letter that came with it; here it is:

Since I am a very superstitious person and I'm inaugurating my whole year's worth of good fortune on the first day, I want to try to make this day lucky for me. You can help, Mademoiselle, if you promise to think of me with goodness. This pâté I offer you will remind you of this during one of your meals. It is made of a sort of meat that is very much to my liking and I want to hope you will like it too (after all, unless I am mistaken, up to now we have always had the same tastes). Know, at least, that it was my intention to offer you a present that you would like and that if I had anything better to offer you, I would have done so with the greatest joy in the world.

Having read this letter, we were still not in agreement about what the pâté was: Artelice and Agelaste thought it was duck and I thought it was two small hares. Saying this, I noticed an inscription on the pâté which persuaded me that I was right. This is what it said:

Here lie two lovers whose fate
Provokes less pity than envy,
For one having died,
The other also lost his life.

To get to the bottom of the mystery, I took a knife and opened the pâté; I was very surprised to see two imitation turtledoves, each one with a note in its beak. I opened the notes and found four lines of verse on each. Here they are:

19 Angélique du Lumagne Pellier de Platbuisson was also the author of the 'Epitaph for the Chameleon', pp. 138–141 above.

20 Agelaste is Angélique Boucquet and the other friend, Artelice, is Catherine d'Arpajon. On the Turtledoves cycle, see Niderst, pp. 455–64.

Love which guided my life,
 Wanting to recompense my faith,
 Gives me a destiny worthy of envy
 Because it brings me to you.

Near to my pleasant turtledove
 Ha! How beautiful is my destiny!
 Fortunate to be enclosed near to her
 * * * * * [lines illegible]

Then I realised that there was a little bundle near the turtledoves with this inscription: *Letters found in the turtledoves' nest*. I opened it and found three of the most beautiful short epistles I've ever encountered. Here they are:

You deprive me of your presence
 By the care you take over my little meals
 But, alas, it is in vain, because your cruel absence
 Will be the death of me.

Response
 My distance makes me suffer as much as you
 For I love you just as tenderly.
 Try to amuse yourself; I will make haste,
 In an hour at most I will be near to you;
 I give you my word:
 Love is the witness of my impatience.

Reply
 I am trying to distract my pain and my sorrows
 By raising my little ones well;
 I teach them that love brought them to life,
 And that they must be animated by this noble ardour;
 Then I make them say by heart
 "I promise love to follow constancy."

The fate of these two little animals seems to me so sweet and
 I find the love that unites them so tender and so touching
 that it makes me want to imitate them. If it has the same
 effect on you, I offer you a heart to be joined to yours and

which will be eternally faithful. If it had been offered by the hand of a lover, the gift would be more gallant, but perhaps less useful because it would be lacking in that constancy which makes it worth something.

Where can one find lovers
Who will be forever faithful to us?
I only know of them in novels
Or in the nests of turtledoves.²¹

As for me, when I believe I have found such lovers, my desires would not incline towards them; on the contrary, I'd listen to those who say to me:

Friendship, not love,
Moves us; on this day,
If you want to see us in peace,
Go and find Sapho, that charming maiden,
Offer her, forever,
Tender sentiments and constant friendship;
Add to this the ardour of love.
The flame which animates us has the same violence;
Examine her heart, see what she thinks;
It is possible that on this very day,
To experience the sweetness of two faithful souls,
We will see ourselves unite like these turtledoves.

I do not claim, however, that you should extend your fidelity as far as to follow me to my tomb — I preclude you from imitating the turtledoves in that; and I will be happy to be loved by you for the rest of my life.

When my days are over,
Dear Sapho, I invite you

21 This quatrain is reprised in Scudéry, 'Histoire de la morale', in *New Moral Conversations*, I, p. 166, where it is attributed to 'Madame de Plabuisson'; it is also reprised in Pellisson, *Œuvres diverses*, I, p. 158. Scudéry quotes it in a letter to Catherine Descartes, attributing it to 'Mme de P...', see Rathery and Boutron, pp. 393–96 (p. 394).

To sing of our tender loves
 And to extend, if possible, the course
 Of your glorious life.

I read all of this with great pleasure. But having engagements until nine o'clock in the evening, I was not able to reply sooner, particularly since my poor wit has been abandoned and wasted for two and a half years.²² But eventually, wanting to deal with it quickly, I replied in a quarter of an hour, with the following:

Sapho, in her melancholy
 Has no more wit, can no longer rhyme,
 But know, aimable Célie,
 That she will always know how to love:
 Receive, therefore, her heart in exchange for yours,
 In tenderness, in constancy, another is worthwhile.

There you have it: that's everything that the person on whom you have played this most pleasant and ingenious little trick, could reply. I confess I was indeed deceived because I have never seen a *pâté* as realistic as the one you sent. Two of my friends were with me when I received it and were as surprised as I was by this clever prank. In truth, I don't think I've encountered anything planned with more gallantry or executed with more finesse. I knew that turtledoves had more tender hearts than warblers, but I did not think they had such gallant wits; I always imagined that their love was melancholic and that they possessed more tenderness than gallantry. I now see that I was doing them an injustice. But importantly, Madame, I want to let you know that the pleasant turtledoves you sent me are not dead! Love has performed a miracle and resuscitated them. They have made their tomb into a nest, and I was astonished to find an egg there this morning, an extraordinarily large one at that. I hope you find it pleasing, Madame, that I am now sending

22 She is referring to September 1661 when Nicolas Fouquet and Paul Pellisson were arrested in Nantes. This dates this exchange to New Year's Day 1664.

it to you. Having consulted a learned gentleman on this serendipity, he told me that this egg contains a truth and that you need to know it. To discover it, you must turn to face the rising sun, and to say, three times, in a low voice:

Powerful love, tell me the truth
Do we still know how to love sincerely?

Then you must break the egg and wait for the rest of the charm. I cannot say more for various reasons. I will leave you, therefore, Madame, so I can look after your pleasant turtledoves: I imagine that you might be jealous, but how can I not love them since they have as much wit as you?

The next day, Monsieur de Valcroissant²³ took this note and the egg in a little porcelain dish to the lady who had given me the turtledoves. She read it, looked at the egg and realised that it was a faux egg; she turned it around carefully, admiring the imitation. She did not want to break it, but Monsieur de Valcroissant told her that she had to: she did so, having repeated these two lines of verse:

Powerful love, tell me the truth
Do we still know how to love sincerely?

But she was surprised to find inside six further lines of verse written on a strip of vellum:

Sapho loves you dearly
And never has any turtledove,
Once she has been loved tenderly,
Known how to love as well as she;
Beyond her heart, there is no more friendship
And the age we live in saddens me.

The next day, Monsieur de Valcroissant conveyed the complaints of my pigeon:

23 Melchior de Marmet de Valcroissant (sometimes known as Terame in poetic exchange), author of *Entretiens du cours ou conversations académiques* (Sercy, 1652).

Sapho's Hen-pigeon to Agelaste

Since in my grief, I can make myself heard,
Agelaste, listen to my tale of a fatal misfortune:
It is to you that I want to teach
The sad cause of my suffering.
If I speak today, if I break the silence,
It is through a crude effort of my cruel torment,
Too fortunate in my suffering
To be able to complain for a moment.

Everyone knows that when I was near our queen
I seemed a slave and yet no longer had any chains;
O gods, I feel my pain increase
Thinking of the good I have lost.

My mistress loved me and I loved my mistress:
And as soon as I had her heart in exchange for mine,
Wise and solid tenderness
Appeared my supreme good.

I had a young lover to whom I was very dear;
My queen took him from me when I was at her court,
And I renounced to please her
All the pleasures of love.

Sometimes in the morning, flying to her bedside,
I would interrupt her sleep,
And making a hundred circles around her
I swore to love her always.

My loving tones and my obedience
Everyday assured her of my faithful ardour,
But neither my care nor my constancy
Were able to maintain my happiness.

The rights of friendship accumulated over time
Were for me weak and superfluous;
Sapho neglects her pigeon
What am I saying? She no longer loves her.

I never thought to be considered a beauty,
I place all my worth in my sweetness alone,
But must it be that two turtledoves
Should so quickly banish me from her heart?

She who so prizes eternal love
Who wishes to give herself to me for a price,
Leaves me for two turtledoves
That she has only known for one day.

They have charm, yes, I acknowledge this,
And their fidelity enchants everyone,
But do they have more tenderness than I have?
And must she stop loving me?

If the wise Sapho abandons me for them;
If the Queen of Tender loves novelty,
We must no longer love anyone
Love no longer has any guarantees.

No, faithfulness no longer means anything, we rely on it in vain;
There is no more constancy, no more friendship
And I know of no-one in the world
In whom I can provoke any pity.

The fatal change of which I complain
Does it not make you feel some jealousy?
Agelaste, you should fear
Lest she also change her feelings towards you.

* * * * *

Since I love my pigeon so much, I could not bear her to be so aggrieved,
so I soothed her in this way:

Sapho to her Hen-pigeon

Hush, dear pigeon
You will always be my sweetheart,
Your friendship, your sweetness

Have forever won my heart;
 I admire the two turtledoves:
 Never have there been such beauties;

 Their charms can captivate all;
 I love even their innocence.
 But to speak truthfully:
 They love each other too much to love me.

Two days later a gentleman, who accompanied the Cardinal de Rets on all his voyages and who has written a moral doctrine in verse, sent me the following poem. He is called M. De Salles.²⁴

The Turtledoves' Reply to Sapho's Hen-pigeon

Pigeon, anger yourself no longer;
 And despite your jealous fears
 Banish these superfluous regrets:
 Listen instead to valid complaints.

 Learn of *our* unfortunate fate,
 The most severe effect
 Of an unparalleled cruelty.
 Your Sapho with a generous and kindly heart
 Is divine for everyone,
 But cruel for us.

 Her hands, her glorious hands,
 Are now profane
 Since their inhuman efforts
 Have come to trouble our spirits.
 These fortunate and constant spirits
 Who no longer had anything to fear from time,
 Were buried in love itself;
 And who even after their death,
 Tasted an extreme sweetness,

24 Jean-François de Salles, sieur Du Sous, author of *Les sentimens d'honneur ou les maximes du sage pour se conduire en honneste homme en quelque sorte de condition de vie que ce soit* (Barbin, 1663). See Niderst, p. 457.

Unknown in life.

With the tokens of their love —
The love notes, the tenderness —
They thought in this sweet residence
To immortalise their caresses,
To enjoy their fidelity
And live out their eternity
In the single desire of pleasing each other.
After avoiding so many shots,
Having remained together even in death,
They are separated by her cruelty.

She should from now on renounce
Her title as Queen of Tender;
Being disloyal to Love,
She should no longer lay claim to this honour.
It is not by beautiful speeches
That one can know love;
It is only by experience,
And the person who thought to separate us
Does not have that splendid knowledge
Which illuminates lovers.

If her heart had felt
That which hearts feel when they love,
She would not have decided
To trouble our supreme happiness.
Instead of interrupting this sleep —
Which we think of as unparalleled,
Sleeping beak-to beak, head-to-head —
She would have been afraid to wake
Lovers who, in honest love,
Were sleeping so tenderly.

Thinking of doing us the honour
Of displaying us above her fireplace,
She upturned the happiness
Of our aimable destiny.

Amongst such rare jewels,
 There is no pleasure for us
 In vain are we considered so beautiful;
 In such a regretful change
 Our hearts which are always faithful
 Will languish eternally.

Pigeon, end your tears
 And do not fear for your fate;
 Renouncing all other favours,
 We only claim one from her:
 In the name of our unique faithfulness,
 Talk to her on our behalf, and on yours,
 And speaking to her without jealousy,
 Tell her that the kindest thing
 She could do in her life,
 Is to put us back in the tomb.

* * * * *

I replied with something off the cuff, which is not worth much:

Response to the Turtledoves

Return to the tomb, charming turtledoves
 Conserve there forever your loving care,
 Because eternal love,
 Hardly makes an appearance here.

Enjoy the peace that innocence brings
 And remain forever in those delightful realms,
 Where cruel absence never
 Causes sad farewells.

But to eternalise this noble tenderness,
 Sapho wants to give you a superb tomb;
 Greater even
 Than the ones built in Greece or Rome.

A thousand wonderful birds of different plumage,
Life-like in their different marble forms,
Will seem to render homage to you
By their pleasant harmony.

And among these birds, an inimitable swan
Will carry in his beak a superb shield
Depicting, with a lamentable air,
The epitaph he had written.

Epitaph

Learn, faithless lovers
How to love constantly:
These blessed turtledoves
Will teach you in a moment:
They only had one heart, they only had one soul,
Only shared desire, only shared passion,
Through constancy and love
They preferred death to the light of day.

* * * * *

Then M. De Salles wrote the following verse:

Epitaph for the Turtledoves Placed in the Tomb by the Divine Sapho

Here lie two perfect lovers
That were seen twice in the world
Once, in accordance with the passing of time,
And again, by a miracle.

Death placed them under its laws
By the failures of age,
And Love, which can do more,
Interfered the second time.

Lying at the foot of a hill

In a hollow invented by Love,
A powerful and divine hand
Resuscitated them, out of honour.

But when they saw how people love;
When they saw the sun again,
They preferred their sleep
To even the pleasure of living again.

"Let us return, let us return to the tomb,"
Said the lover to his turtledove:
"Love here not is beautiful,
Life here is no longer beautiful.

It is only in this monument
That we taste the pleasures of immortal love;
And this age has no lover
Who will not one day be unfaithful.

Despite their inhumanity
The Fates are still less to be feared,
Than the wicked infidelity
Of a heart which promises and pretends.

In the horrors of Hell itself,
We can find perseverance;
And hearts which carry chains
Carry there those of constancy."

In the face of these arguments,
They both concluded that life
Promised a less pleasant path,
Than that which follows it.

Their hearts, tender in friendship
In a friendship founded on love,
Begged Sapho to have pity,
And to release them from the world.

Then she, to help them
And to show some humanity,
Caused their second death
To relieve them of their suffering.

Lovers, if there is among you
Still one who is a little faithful,
Wish for a fate as sweet as this
After a death as beautiful.

* * * * *

This same gentleman wrote, after this, some poems under the name of Poupot (this is my nephew's name).²⁵ Here they are:

What! Pigeon, will Poupot be the only one,
To remain in silence
When the whole world admires you!
No, no: however little he may be,
To afford you what you deserve
He will prompt others to speak and write.

He will make them love even better,
And this is what makes us rhyme well;
Regarding so tender a subject
And the chapter of love,
He teaches, day after day,
As much as one can learn.

This is his dearest lesson,
And through these poems in his style
He exhorts you to do the same:
To reveal his secret —
The ABC of his alphabet
Is to love well who loves well.

25 'Poupot' is Louis de Scudéry, son of Georges and Marie-Madeleine du Moncel de Martinvast, who would have been one and half at this time. See Niderst, pp. 455–57.

* * * * *

One of my friends wrote this poem about what Poupot had said about the ABC of my Alphabet:

The ABC of your Alphabet
Is to love well one who loves well:
Whoever made this little joke
Has been around the sun a few times.

I find you advanced in years,
And it is, even for you, too much learning;
After 20 years of experience
I only follow your ABC.

* * * * *

M. de Salles offered this response, in Poupot's name:

You find me much experienced
In this lesson of love,
But you have not appreciated,
That in love, neither time, nor age
Teaches us anything more.

In this admirable occupation,
That one undertakes almost from birth
The apprentice who comes last
Is as learned as the teacher.

Love which gives its lesson
In its own marvellous way,
Teaches its disciplines in a flash;
He who does not grasp it immediately,
Studies and strives in vain
But can never learn it.
And the situation, in the end, is resolved:
For he who knows the ABC knows everything.

* * * * *

Letter from Célie to a Little Cupid Called Poupot

When yesterday I visited the superb tomb that the divine Sapho had erected for two turtledoves, I saw many people assembled around it in admiration listening to one of the masters of ceremony who said in a loud voice:

“Gather, all faithful lovers
 Come and pay homage to the tomb of these two turtledoves;
 But do not groan and shed tears:
 Instead, cast flowers!
 If this miserly season on earth has not produced enough
 beautiful flowers,
 Remember Parnassus produces immortal ones all year round.
 But even if it has already been two days since the seeds were
 sown,²⁶
 I have still not seen
 A lover present a gift, to the disgrace of our beautiful turtledoves.
 Lovers who refuse to offer flowers
 To decorate a tomb where constancy reigns,
 Would you put up the same resistance
 If one demanded your hearts?”

Do not imitate these bad examples, dear Poupot, and since you have already sacrificed your little heart to Cupid, and you want to undertake a whole course at his school, become constant: Constancy is a useful mistress to those with your intentions and who want to make great progress in time.

To instruct oneself in her laws, place yourself in her hands,
 For although her lessons are old fashioned
 She teaches the surest method
 To make amorous designs succeed.

26 The French contains a pun ‘bien que il y ait deux jours qu’il ait fait cette semence’ [although it is two days since these seeds were sown], with ‘semence’ used figuratively, as it can be in English and as I have here, meaning since the event responsible for the tomb (ie it is two days since the turtledoves’ death).

* * * * *

Come, then, and be the first to pay homage to Constancy by visiting the tomb of these two animals who were so faithful to her during their lives. You can easily make an offering that they will like, for I recently saw in your hands the most beautiful flowers with the sweetest smell. I think that Cupid, whom you resemble so strongly, has picked them on the mountain that you, at your age, cannot climb. But whether it was Cupid or Nature who made you this present, I invite you with haste to offer these flowers while they bloom so beautifully and with that freshness which makes all flowers so pleasant.

These little animals favoured by Cupid,
Will be grateful to you for this offering;
I know that their credit increases every day
That this god, without hesitating, gives himself to their
 demands.
Use them for yourself, for, before long
Your little heart will burst into flame.
And although you are as pleasant
And as beautiful as this god who gives his laws to all
You could be miserable
Since this god himself has cried many times out of love,
Ensure, therefore, today, that these laws favour you
By offering your flowers as sacrifices.

* * * * *

I wrote, in an instant, this reply on behalf of Poupot to the aimable Célie:

Your letter, dear Célie
Is very gallant and pleasant,
You think agreeably,
You express yourself nobly,
And throughout the Empire of Love,
No-one can write better.
Little Cupids like us
Do not write love letters:

Do not reproach me for this.
 For I am a new-look Cupid:
 I possess neither arrows nor quivers,
 I do not know how to make laws,
 Venus was never my mother.
 I have never been to Cythera;
 I do not carry a torch,
 I do not have a blindfold,
 But I have a tender and sensitive heart
 See if you want to take it.

* * * * *

One of my friends wrote the following poem:

Anacreon's Hen-pigeon to Sapho's Hen-pigeon

Truly I find you so good:
 You troublemaker, you little rascal!
 You are forgiven your fluttering
 Pecking and whispering,
 But you take it upon yourself to sing:
 And who can stand it?
 Am I not the only pigeon
 To whom Jupiter has offered
 (Not you, little harpy),
 The privilege of telling a story
 And of chattering like a magpie?

* * * * *

Response of Sapho's Hen-pigeon

If old age is a privilege,
 Then, I confess, it is yours.
 But eventually everything changes, everything ends;
 France surpasses Greece

Do not play the Princess
 I will happily concede to you,
 When your master, Anacreon,
 Beats my Mistress.

* * * * *

Sapho to her Hen-pigeon

That is too much, dear Pigeon
 You speak like a Gascon!
 Your zeal has run away with you:
 Do not be so vain.
 To be wise and well instructed,
 You must be sweet and submissive;
 You are not a little goose
 Who does not understand reason!
 And when this proud Pigeon
 Dares call you a rascal
 You must not praise me,
 I must stress to you
 That is not good grace.
 A little peck is, as yet, forgiven,²⁷
 For it is permitted to pluck the feathers of
 Those who tease us without love.
 For a pigeon from Greece
 Where politeness was everywhere
 This one speaks brusquely:
 Anacreon speaks differently.
 And those who can hear him
 Say that his style is so tender
 So full of charm, so full of wit
 That it is from him alone that one learns
 To paint love and joy

27 'Little peck': in French, 'coup de bec'. This is a pun as 'coup de bec' also means an insult.

With silken words.
 I do not claim to equal him:
 It is not for you to speak of it
 This is why, my dear Mignonne,
 You must concede to his pigeon.

This marks the end of the story of the turtledoves. Célie is a very aimable person who has much wit, delicacy and wisdom; who has goodness, sweetness, noble sentiments, virtue, and grace: in a word, she is not pretentious,²⁸ she shows me much friendship. As for her person, she is attractive, all her features are regular, her eyes beautiful and full of sweetness, her complexion is smooth; her shape delicate and agreeable, and she possesses the physiognomy of a real turtledove.

FIN.

Warblers

MS Tallemant des Reaux, Le Manuscrit 673, La Rochelle, Bibliothèque de La Rochelle ; Le Manuscrit 673 de Tallemant des Réaux, ed. by Vincenette Maigne (Klincksieck, 1994), pp. 622–23. This poem is also printed in Rathery and Boutron, p. 523.

The Warbler to Sapho

Having arrived, as is her custom, at her little wood on April 15th:

After a harsh winter
 I return to this shade
 My heart just as full of love
 And ready to render homage to you
 With my feeble song.

But this amiable wood
 Whose greenery enchants me
 Is no longer as it once was,

28 'She has no pretensions to wit': 'elle ne fait point le bel esprit'. 'Bel esprit' is a specific term connoting a sort of pedantry in this context.

Because the ingenious Acante
No longer replies to my voice.

Despite his cruel silence,
Because he sang my loves,
I am still grateful:
I will admire him forever.

During my long life
He loved only one great King.
Who from the Levant to the Great Bear
Brings both love and terror,
And submits all to his law.

When he left Versailles
I saw this unparalleled King,
Like the god of war
Brighter than the sun.

I thought a hundred times of following him
Instead of coming to you
And I would have happily lived
Near such a kind hero.

But having seen the victory
Which flew around him
I knew well that glory
Would call him away from us today.

I thought I heard the thunder,
I saw flashes of light,
I felt the earth tremble,
And I feared the war
Would trouble the world.

Not having a strong enough wing
For this swift warrior
I have come back to my mulberry tree
And continue to pray
That soon he will bring us
Either an olive branch or a laurel.

‘The Story of Prince Ariamene’

(partial translation)

Clearque (and then Theramène) read the Story of Prince Ariamene to a group of friends. We are told at the end of the previous conversations, ‘On Impertinence’, that this account was written by the brother of the poet Simonides and was found in an old manuscript in ancient Greek, then rewritten in French translation. Theramène adds that all the key events recounted in this story can be found in Herodotus, Josephus, Diodorus and others, even though the translator might have added some embellishments.

The story tells of the court of King Darius and Queen Atossa, daughter of Cyrus the Great, and the succession of Darius’s two sons, Ariamene, his eldest son by a different wife, born before he was King, and Xerxes, his son with Atossa, born three years later. The story centres on the confusion as to which of the two brothers will succeed to the throne; everyone thinks it will be Ariamene, only to find out on Darius’s death that it will be Xerxes. Scudéry has embellished the story with love interests for both princes. Amestris, the future wife of Xerxes (and future Queen), is given a prominent role: initially she is in love with Ariamene, thinking he will succeed his father, and he loves her in return. Other characters are invented, such as Palmis, loved by Xerxes, but in love with Ariamene. The first part of the story, not translated here (pp. 95–132) relays Darius’s reign and the love ‘square’ of his sons, Amestris, and Palmis.

p. 132:

Such was the state of things when Demaratus, King of Sparta took refuge in the court of King Darius for reasons well known to history. At the same time, Democritus, the famous philosopher, visited Susa and was very well received by the King, who knew his father and held him

in high regard.¹ Since Democritus only ever travelled to study, Darius accommodated him in a pleasant pavilion in the gardens of his palace. The whole of the Susa region was flush with flowers, particularly lilies, so the air he breathed was healthy, pleasant and perfumed — it was here that he wrote his very novel treatise on odours and colours, and another on butterflies. However, history does not speak about the latter, and it can only be found in the Greek manuscript I mentioned.

*

“But,” interrupted Cleomire, addressing Theramène, “have I not seen a portrait of this philosopher in your study; he has a smiling and mocking air and is placed next to a figure always weeping.”²

“That’s the one,” said Theramène.

“I’m delighted,” said Cleomire, “for I have long wanted to learn more about him, since I always prefer pleasant philosophy to severe philosophy.”³

“In that case,” replied Theramène, “I must tell you a bit about him before I continue to read. He was still very young when he was philosophising in the beautiful gardens of Susa, so I will tell you a little about him and keep it brief, even though he lived for 109 years. He spent eighty of them travelling, shunning glory, having no other passion than study. He was born wealthy but spent his money on travel: however, since according to the laws of his country, those who ruined themselves financially by travelling were considered incapable of holding public office and denied the honour of a burial, he became rich again through his rare learning. He then gave everything he had acquired

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- 1 Susa was an ancient city situated between what are now the Karkheh and Dez rivers in Iran. It was the winter capital of the Achaemenid Empire. Demaratus, King of Sparta (515–491 BCE), sought refuge in the Achaemenid Empire under Darius the Great, after rivalry with his co-ruler King Cleomenes I. It is said that Democritus’s father housed and supported Xerxes and his army (as mentioned later in this text).
 - 2 Democritus, ‘the laughing philosopher’, was often contrasted with Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, in what became a visual and verbal commonplace: see the Introduction.
 - 3 The French has ‘*morale sans peine*’ and ‘*morale sévère*’ with ‘*morale*’ here referring to a system of moral conduct or philosophy, hence my imperfect translation as ‘philosophy’. ‘Moral philosophy’ or ‘moral system’ or ‘ethics’ might be more appropriate but seemed awkwardly specific here; ‘morals’ is too specific in English.

to his brothers, given that he mocked ambition, the ambitious and all advantages of wealth, to the extent that his own compatriots thought he was mad and sent for the famous Hippocrates, whose reputation endures today, to come and heal him. But this great man, having spoken to him, found him to be the wisest and most learned philosopher he had ever known and considered those who thought him mad to be lacking sense themselves. As a result, when Democritus's work was published, a statue was erected in his honour and his town made him a present of five hundred talents. His learning extended to all things: he sought out the most learned of all nations: in Egypt, amongst the Chaldeans, the Magi of Persia, the Brahmins of India and the Gymnosophists of Ethiopia.⁴ He wrote treatises on Astronomy, Ethics, Physics, Metaphysics, Medicine, Agriculture, Poetry, and Painting. He also amused himself in writing little treatises on pleasant subjects, like chameleons, odours, colours, and found nothing unworthy of his attention except wealth and excessive love of glory."⁵

"I assure you," interrupted Clearque, "that this man who laughed at everything and mocked those who sought glory did not in fact disdain it as much as it seems: for although history states that he was in Athens without wanting to be known there, he was heard to say more than once that although he did not want to be a credit to the place he was born, he preferred people to say that he was a credit to the places he went."

"It would seem," said Cleomire, "that he had not therefore renounced all forms of glory."

"I agree," replied Theramène. "But it is still the case that no philosopher ever possessed less vanity, or renounced ambition in such good faith, finding true pleasure in study alone and in the pursuit of knowledge that went beyond what the sublimity of the human mind can know with certainty. His death was as sweet and tranquil as his life and it is even said that he managed to delay it by three days. However, we must admit that the history of that time has so many contradictions that he who wrote the Story of Ariamene was permitted to follow,

4 Magi refers to priests in ancient Persia; Brahmin is a varna historically associated within Hindu society with priesthood and learning; and the Gymnosophists was the name given by Greeks to ascetic philosophers of Ethiopia. See *Brill's New Pauly online*, ed. by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill, 2002–11).

5 Much of this account derives from Diogenes Laertius's 'Life of Democritus': see the Introduction.

according to his preference, either the different historians who talked about Democritus's life or the Greek manuscript that he had in his possession, without being accused of ignorance in having conflated some events. What is certain is that if Plato hated Democritus, Cicero praised him highly. I think, though, that it is now time to return to the Story of Ariamene."

"We entreat you to resume it," said Hermilie, "for I can tell by their expressions that Cleomire and Cleone have as much desire as I do to hear the rest."

Theramène, heeding this request, continued to read.

*

The arrival at the court of Darius of Demaratus, Democritus and the young Simonides, who wrote poetry just as well as his brother, was a great source of pleasure.⁶ Darius wanted the philosopher and Simonides to meet his sons, the two Princes, and on occasion to go with them to visit the Queen, where they would also encounter Amestris, Palmis and the other ladies. As for Democritus, he usually had to be sought out in the gardens where he was housed, since he only loved studying and tended to avoid people. He quickly became known for having new and unusual ideas about all sorts of things; he was thus asked innumerable questions to which he always replied agreeably without getting annoyed if he was contradicted: he just laughed and that entertained the whole court. One day, the two Princes took him to the Queen who was in her private chamber,⁷ where freer conversation was possible. Amestris, who had a lively, brilliant and intelligent mind and who had heard people talk about the atoms that Democritus believed had created the world, did not want to miss this opportunity to find out whether what people had said about this philosopher was true. She entreated Ariamene to turn the conversation to this subject. The Prince, addressing Democritus, said, "These ladies here are very curious to know if what people have said about your opinion of atoms is correct."

6 Simonides of Ceos (c. 556–468 BCE) was a Greek lyric poet who wrote commemorative poetry on military themes particularly during the wars with Persia.

7 'private chamber' for the French 'cabinet', which seemed more appropriate for a Queen than 'study' or simply 'room.' See also 'On Uncertainty' note 55.

"It is true," interrupted Amestris smiling, "that I would be very surprised if Democritus persuaded me that the sun and the moon, which each in turn light up the universe, were made of gathered dust alone. This seems to me so surprising and so implausible that Palmis and I would be pleased to hear him talk about it."

"Truth and plausibility,"⁸ replied Democritus with an agreeable smile, "are not always found together: there are things which are true which are not plausible; and there are things which are plausible that are not true — indeed there are countless examples visible to everyone that prove what I am saying. Since it is not appropriate to talk in depth about philosophy to ladies who should only, it seems to me, know innocent pleasures, politeness, and virtue, I will use small and evident examples to give you the chance to believe that what I say about greater matters is not impossible.⁹ Allow me," he continued, looking at Amestris and Palmis, "to lead your imagination into the most beautiful gardens in which I am currently living. I ask you to look at this charming river, which is one of the great beauties of Susa, and to look at it when it is illuminated by the rising and setting sun. Since I have learnt," he added laughing, "that the ladies of the court do not often see the sun rise, I will instead ask you to take a look at this great river on a beautiful summer's day, at a time I recommend, and you will see it look like a river of liquid opal, painted and patterned with various colours: ruby mixed with azure blue and gold. But if you were to look at the sea, you would see something else entirely. I can prove this to you with Homer's descriptions, knowing that you know the Greek language better than I know yours: he describes the seas as purple, green, and white when turbulent; and when they are calm, for him, the waves are silver and he describes them simply as white-ish. However, these colours are not actual colours, nor are those in a rainbow, which seems so beautiful to us. Thus, in these sorts of matters, what seems to be true and what is true cannot combine, since I am certain that all these beautiful and bright colours are only caused by the refraction of rays of light and by the bright rays that reflect them against each other. Having thus proved

8 The French has 'vérité' and 'vraisemblance' so here the close relation of the words is lost in my translation (perhaps 'truth and true-seeming' would capture it best).

9 'Little and evident examples' for 'petites démonstrations sensibles' – 'sensibles' here meaning that can be grasped by the senses.

to you that without reason and without proof to guide judgement you might believe that there are actual colours when there are not, I also need to tell you that there some things which are real that you cannot see but can only feel. The wind," he continued, "is one such example: for that which uproots huge trees, knocks over great buildings, makes the sea rise up and cause so many shipwrecks is certainly an invisible body." He then added, smiling, "So too this very air, perfumed by the great crop of lilies which fill the gardens around here, possesses some sort of indescribable invisible vapour that emanates from the flowers and which cannot be seen. For it is not the sense of smell which finds the flowers, but it is something that comes from the flowers that seeks out the sense of smell."

"What Democritus says," said Ariamene, "is very pleasant for ladies to hear."

"I agree," said Xerxes, "but the ladies he is talking to are not ordinary ladies: they have been taught by Greek women."

"I do not doubt," said Democritus, "the beauty and the excellence of the minds of the ladies to whom I speak, for one must not assume that I think that intelligence can be found only in Greece — indeed, I am travelling almost around the world in order to find out new things — but it is rather that in general I normally only talk about philosophy with philosophers." Then he added, "What are the chances that I would speak about the sun in a court where it is worshipped?¹⁰ And then," he pursued, laughing, "to deserve my reputation of mocking everything, there are moments when I mock even myself and when I find myself almost as far from good sense as those whom I believe not to possess any at all."

"This sincerity delights me," said Amestris, "and seems to me worthy of much praise. If you had undertaken to make mountains alone of your atoms," she added, "I would not have been so surprised, but the way in which people say you speak about atoms suggests that they create everything, both that which reasons and that which does not. I cannot hide that I find it a great audacity of the human spirit to want to determine absolutely things which one can only know by conjecture."

"Sometimes there are such strong conjectures," said Democritus with

10 In ancient Iran, Mithra was the deity of light, oaths, justice and the sun.

a smile, "that one is hardly mistaken in drawing from them inevitable conclusions."¹¹

"We must remain in agreement on this," said Prince Ariamene, "and if Artabase spoke to you," he continued, looking at him, "as he spoke to me when he was my governor on his return from Jerusalem where Darius had sent him to rebuild the Temple, he would make you see, using just those inevitable conclusions drawn from strong conjectures, that there is no excuse among people as enlightened as the Greeks for believing in more than one god. For," he continued, "although we Persians do not follow the sentiments of the Jews, even though they were greatly protected by Cyrus and they still are by Darius, at least we believe in a single god, and unlike the Greeks with their gods, we do not attribute to him human weakness: instead, the sun that we worship as the image of this invisible god who protects the universe is considered in Persia as the cause of everything that is beautiful and good."

"Since I travel expressly to learn," replied Democritus with a smile, "and since I am currently hosted in this court with more honour than I deserve, I will not undertake to defend Hercules or Minerva or any of the other Greek gods. And although it would be easier for me to defend better my atoms than all those gods, it is enough for me to hold these views myself without trying to persuade others, aware that it is always difficult to establish new ideas. However, I would be more than happy if the wise and learned Artabase wanted to tell me by what conjecture they convinced him in Jerusalem about this single God worshipped there."

"Since I see that the Princes and the ladies in this company will permit me," replied Artabase, "I will tell you in a few words, without the long list of wonders which inspire in those who learn of them such great admiration and deep respect for the God of Israel. I suggest simply that it is very easy for human reason to understand that by necessity only one God created the world and is its guardian. All the parts of the universe considered both separately and together prove this. Chance, but a vain chimera, could not have established the order that we see in the heavens or the wonders that we see on the earth, even in its centre, and, by necessity, an intelligent being created us since we are intelligent."

11 This echoes the phrase in 'On Uncertainty', p. 90. Here Democritus uses this phrase to support his atomist position; in 'On Uncertainty', Aristene uses the same phrase to justify knowledge of God.

"You will admit, at least," replied Democritus, a bit perplexed, "that this single God, whatever he is, is incomprehensible."

"But," replied Artabase, "if our reason is enlightened, it will teach us that God *should* be incomprehensible, for how can an infinite being, who by necessity has produced all other beings, how can that infinite being enter into a finite mind? It would be easier to enclose all the water of the sea into a small river. Besides, man can never understand anything perfectly without the help of his imagination; however, the imagination can only conceive of something that has already passed by the senses:¹² for even when we imagine things which have never existed, like mountains of gold and rocks made of diamonds, this is still possible because we have seen diamonds, gold and mountains. If we had not seen any of these three things, our imagination would not be able to put them together to make an idea of them. This is why we can never understand perfectly the essence and the existence of God, for our senses have never grasped anything of him, or anything similar to him, and therefore nothing of him or similar to him can be imagined, and, as I have already said, without imagination perfect understanding is not possible."

"What you say," replied Democritus, "is not so different to what I think."

"No," replied Artabase, "but what I am about to say will be different: it does not follow that we must deny the existence of God just because we cannot understand this existence perfectly, since even in natural and finite matters we see many things which we do not understand. Who is it," he added, "who does not believe that the light they see is something and yet who is it who understands what it is? I can say as much," he pursued, "about the qualities sensed by sight, hearing, and smell and about hundreds of other things, as you yourself have talked about when discussing smells that we can detect but cannot see."

"But," replied Democritus, "our senses assure you of the existence of those things."

"But correct reason," replied Artabase, "assures us even more strongly of the existence of God and there are many things that reason persuades us of without making us doubt, even if we cannot imagine these things."

12 This echoes the phrase in 'On Uncertainty', p. 93, where Aristene uses it to make the same argument.

Indeed, is it not true that when one considers the construction of the universe, the sunrise and sunset, it is not possible for anyone, even the most simple-minded, to doubt that the world is a globe and that by necessity it has antipodes, which we have known about for some time."¹³

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"It is true," interrupted Cleomire, "that even though I have heard this discussed by my brother, who knows everything that one can know about these things, I have never been able to imagine that these people, who are said to be on the other side of the world, with their feet planted on the earth between us and therefore are upside down, from our perspective, might think that they are the right way up, just as I think we are."

"However strongly reason persuades me that this is the case," replied Clearque, "I confess that I cannot form a clear idea of it either. Some say that they can imagine these people without difficulty, but unless I am mistaken, they only imagine they can imagine them and have not really questioned themselves. For truthfully it is not difficult to imagine people on the other side of the world with feet towards the centre of the earth, and we think of them as those on our side, as in effect we see them; but we think of them and us separately. To think of them and us at the same time, with our feet corresponding, without anyone being upside down, is something I cannot do even though my reason persuades me that it is exactly like this. This difficulty, or, if you want, impossibility, in imagining them comes from the fact that our senses have never experienced anything similar: we have never seen a globe without one part on the top and one part on the bottom."

"Everything you say," said Theramène, "is discussed briefly in the next section of the story that I am about to read. Pythagoras, in that time, thanks to his wise reflections, possessed some knowledge of the antipodes which so many other philosophers have doubted since then:

13 The historical meaning of 'antipodes' in French, as in English, is 'people who live on the directly opposite side of the world' (see also the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* and Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel*). The language Scudéry goes on to use to talk about them echoes the definition of 'antipodes' in Cotgrave: 'The Antipodes; the people which goe directly against vs, or with the soles of their feet against ours.'

his opinion on this matter was as new as the ideas of atoms. This is fitting for what I reported that Artabase said to Democritus, who replied to him as follows:

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"I think you want to talk about," said Democritus, "a great man who taught us that a star which appears in the morning is the same as the one which appears in the evening."¹⁴

"While you only make mountains and rocks of your atoms, as Amestris has said," interrupted Palmis in a pleasant tone, while looking at Democritus, "I will not oppose you, but to suggest that they make all the stars, even the sun, and all the beauties of the universe: I confess that I will never be persuaded of this."

"In my opinion," replied Xerxes looking at Palmis, "I do not think that the most beautiful eyes in the world are made of atoms."

"They would have to be," interrupted Ariamene, laughing, "atoms lit up like sparks."

"How gallant of you to say," said Palmis, "but my main objection to Democritus's atoms is that I will never understand how the same thing, and such a simple and small thing at that, can metamorphose into things as different as gold, pearls, diamonds, forests, including the fierce beasts which live there, as well as the sea and its fish, if it was not a God who made this, rather than blind chance."

Democritus, realising that his new doctrine would not be well received in the palace of Darius, did not insist on talking about it as a philosopher; instead, humourously replied to Palmis, "I assure you that these lit up atoms that Prince Ariamene mentioned so gallantly, wanting to mock the ones I was talking about, are more true than he thinks, although I have never felt their power."

Saying this, Democritus made it known that through respect for where he was and for the people he was talking to, he did not want to engage in an argument with Artabase. He promised the ladies he would write a treatise on colours and on smells — works historians talk about but which have not survived. However, since Democritus's conversation

¹⁴ Pythagoras.

was so congenial to the ladies and this also provided an opportunity for the Princes to talk to them, rarely would he spend a day either in the garden of the palace or at the Queen's place, without people stealing a few hours of the philosopher's time to ask him further questions. He knew how to talk about everything and although he also mocked almost everything, even his most playful responses always had a solid basis. Indeed, a few days after the conversation just relayed, the Queen, walking in the gardens, went to rest in Democritus's pavilion, where he was still talking to Artabase. She sent most of her entourage away to walk the nearby avenues where they would find seats here and there, wanting to be accompanied only by the two Princes and a handful of her female companions, including Amestris and Palmis.

The philosopher received this visit not only with all the respect due to a great Queen, but also with the respect he wanted to show towards the daughter of Cyrus and the wife of Darius, thinking more about the virtue of these two great Kings than about their crown. Queen Atossa apologised for disturbing the retreat he was spending so usefully, and added:

"Just as the sick seek out a doctor, it is not odd that those who are ignorant should seek out those who are learned to benefit from their study. I would like to ask you a question: can you explain why we often encounter people who show no signs of malice before they arrive at court, but once they have been there for some time, acquire it and are no longer the same as before?"

"Since you ask me to speak," said Democritus, with his natural and pleasant air, "I presuppose that you will allow me to speak as a philosopher without hiding my feelings."

"That was my intention," replied the Queen, "for I do not expect you to reply to me as a courtier."

"In that case, Madame," Democritus replied, "I will tell you that just as we see freshwater fountains, streams, rivers, and the largest waterways enter the seas with their sweet water only to become salty, so too does this often occur to people from far off provinces, brought up in innocence and simplicity, when they arrive at a great court. Just as some philosophers think that the great and continual movement of the sea causes in part its salty quality, so too at court are passions agitated and reign there more than elsewhere, causing that indefensible malice you

mentioned. Ambition, desire, love are all followed by hatred, jealousy, and revenge; and profligacy caused by false glory or pleasure is more often found there than true generosity. Sometimes the profligate are parsimonious in some things to satisfy their profligacy in others. But, Madame," he added gallantly, "there is always some Arethusa who crosses the bitter waves without taking on any bitterness herself and I think that this happens more in your court than in any other in the world."

"If I was as good a philosopher," said Ariamene, laughing, "as you are courtier, I would have no need to consult you. Having offered this accurate painting of the court, you then with just two deft brushstrokes composed a flattering portrait: anyone here might take the liberty of thinking they embody this Arethusa you mention so astutely."

"I assure you," replied Democritus with his playful air, "that I have said what I think without any disguise, and that I only seek to understand the secrets of the heavens, the earth and of nature more generally: I do not seek to flatter anyone. I am more like one of the courtiers of Cyrus who had no wish to discover his secrets."

"But is it possible," replied Xerxes, "that solitude holds great pleasures for a man who speaks so pleasantly?"

"Continuous solitude," replied Democritus, "could not bring great pleasures; however, seeing the world occasionally, to then disdain it, having known it, is a salient pleasure. It is also a pleasure to reflect alone on the conversations one has had with learned people. In short, there is no greater fortune than in not seeking company, and a true philosopher is never bored because he is always thinking about all sorts of things. Even the smallest things make him think of great ones: ants give him a better idea of a perfect Republic than Sparta or Athens; bees offer an admirable model of a monarchical state; pelicans show fatherly love for their children; cygnets the rightful gratitude of children for their fathers: a philosopher is never idle — he wants to understand everything down to the little butterflies which fly around him when he walks alone."

"Ah," said Amestris, quietly addressing Ariamene, "I would like to know what makes the variety of their colours for I find them so patterned and so pretty that I have often been curious about the cause."

"Democritus would be able to satisfy this curiosity," said the Queen who had heard what Amestris said, "and I find it very pleasant."

Democritus did not want to commit to this and only commented that he was surprised that Amestris was not instead curious to find out about their apparent inconstancy rather than the cause of their colours, especially since there are so many courtiers at the court who imitate butterflies and so often change their manners according to their passions. The Queen approved of what Democritus said and having rested enough she continued her walk, while the two Princes benefitted from Democritus's final words, using them to assure their loved ones that they would never be inconstant.

"Inconstancy," replied Amestris, wittily, "is one of those things that you can never predict, for since it is a new love that chases away an old one, one can as little predict the new passion as the one that came first."

"What you say," said Ariamene, "is pertinent for those who naturally have changeable affections or for those who love someone of mediocre worth who might easily be abandoned for someone greater. But," he continued, "when you have a heart like mine and when you adore the most perfect person in the world whose beauty is widely praised on its own, without reference to her mind, and whose mind charms without the aid of beauty, you must persuade yourself that you will love until your dying breath even when you do not hope to be loved in return."

"Since there is much vanity," replied Amestris with a noble and modest air, "in what you have said, I do not need to reply to it, but in general I think that the surest route is to let time reveal the constancy — or the flightiness — of those who love us."

After this Amestris moved closer to Palmis who had not replied as favourably to Xerxes, who also wanted to assure her that he would never be inconstant. Palmis then tried to persuade him that the best thing would be to change his feelings, if he did indeed feel for her as he said he did.

"It is not," she said to him, "that I do not have for you all the respect that I owe your rank and all the esteem that I owe your worth; but rather, having resolved never to marry, I think that civility requires me to tell you this with sincerity."

"Ah beautiful Palmis," replied Xerxes, "I cannot believe that your heart is so insensitive: there is something so touching in your eyes, so tender in the tone of your voice and so sweet in your manner that all this cannot mean an insensitive heart. In short if you do not love now, you

will love one day. I pray to the heavens that I am the one on whom you bestow this great pleasure and honour, for I believe that there is nothing as pleasant or glorious as conquering a heart resistant to love when it is generous and noble.”

Palmis blushed without replying and turned towards Amestris, who had remained close to her. After this, the Princes, having accompanied the Queen to her apartment, went into the large gallery that looked over the gardens...

[...] pp. 170–83. *In the intervening passage, the lovers continue their entanglements: Palmis reflects with sadness that Ariamene is in love with Amestris and pours out her heart to her confidante, Phedime. The two brothers remain close.*

p. 183:

One of the most pleasant entertainments at court at that time was observing the delightful criticisms Democritus made of everything that pleased others, and of all passions in general, including the pursuit of glory, finding everything frivolous except the desire to learn. He even argued that because one can never know anything except doubtfully, the limitation of the human mind was something people should be the most aware of, to stop them thinking too highly of themselves.¹⁵ He maintained that ambition always caused innumerable injustices; that love, usually having as its object something as fragile as beauty, can only cause inexcusable weakness, and that unbridled pleasure, inconstancy, and jealousy were almost always its companions. For him, the desire for revenge always went deeper than the insult that caused it; hatred usually tormented the hater more than the hated; and the violent desire for glory was also always mixed with vanity because people wish to be praised more than they deserve to be.

However, all Ariamene could think about was pleasing Amestris, who from time to time entreated him to remind Democritus about the treatise on butterflies that she wanted him to write, since he had written excellent ones about colours and odours. Ariamene came up with a secret

15 ‘one can never know anything except doubtfully’: as in ‘On Uncertainty’, I have retained the adverbial use of ‘douteusement’ [‘doubtfully’], even if this is slightly awkward in English.

gallant little plan with the help of a select few. On Amestris' birthday, as she received pretty presents from her friends, Ariamene sent her the most perfect and gallant little golden box decorated with little stones, in which she found some magnificent tablets on which Democritus had written his remarks on butterflies. Introducing these remarks was this poem written in a different hand:

Butterflies to the beautiful Amestris

*Since we love the light,
Your beautiful eyes have attracted us;
Even more than the sun in its first brilliance
Do they deserve to be adored.*

Amestris was pleasantly surprised by this gallant token. Palmis was with her when she received it and it caused different feelings in the hearts of these two beautiful people: Amestris felt unparalleled joy in receiving this pleasant gift; whereas Palmis felt some pain at this very joy — Amestris, having no idea about her feelings for Ariamene, had shown her the poem.

"This poem," said Amestris, having read it aloud laughing, "is too gallant to accompany a philosopher's treatise."

Palmis replied maliciously, "I think this poem is by the young Simonides and not by a Persian: however beautiful your eyes, a Persian would hesitate to compare them to the sun."

"Remember," replied Amestris, a little haughtily, "that Phedime and Cerinte, with whom we have read so many poems from their country, have taught us that poetry has privileges which prose does not possess: what butterflies say can cause no offence to the sun. In any case," she added, "I find this present very pretty and if the observations on butterflies are as pleasant as this poem, they will give me much pleasure."

"For me," replied Palmis, "since I think that Democritus is still a greater philosopher than whoever wrote this poem is a poet, I expect more pleasure from the remarks than from the poem."

"Each to his own," replied Amestris. "But regarding the remarks, we must wait for Artabase to be present before we read them because he understands these sorts of things better than us."

Amestris then sent for him to come to her apartment, for since he had been Ariamene's governor, he could move freely through the palace. As soon as he arrived, Amestris showed him the poem and the remarks, thinking that was all there was in the box. Artabase took the remarks and read something of them to himself before reading them aloud and admired the delicacy with which this great philosopher had treated this subject. But while Artabase was reading them and thinking about them, Amestris was pleasantly surprised to find at the bottom of the box a little picture, bordered with gold, on which a series of multicoloured butterflies were represented beautifully. In their flight, they formed the first letter of Amestris' name. Under this picture were delightful tablets containing these lines of verse:

Butterflies to the beautiful Amestris¹⁶

*To show you our zeal
We have sped
To the famous meeting place
That Flora has chosen at your home.
The day of your birth
She decorates your head
With flowers whose colourful array
Mixes with the green of laurels.
These flowers are our mistresses;
We offer them a thousand caresses
And it is for them that Cupid
Makes us fly all day long.
Wherever they are born
Wherever they grow,
In field or furrow,
To each one a butterfly.
On our patterned wings
We each carry the livery
Of the flower that charmed us
And whose love we seek.*

16 Marginal note 'M. Betoul'. This most likely refers to Élie de Bétoulaud who wrote the first Chameleon poem in the series published with 'The Story of Two Chameleons', see p. 121 above.

*The Butterfly which serves the tuberose
Shows its devotion
With white on a grey background.
The one which loves the rose
Has on its shining wing
A background of bright purple.
It is thus that we express our love
To beautiful flowers.
But for their charming beauty
Our love increases still,
Seeing them bloom
Everywhere to please you
And to decorate the garlands
With which you are made thousands of offerings.
We come now
To this bright court
To offer you our homage;
Our temperament is not flighty,
And although it seems, seeing us
Flit around from morning to night,
That our passions are light-hearted
Inconstant, fleeting,
And without substance:
However, this lightness is reserved
Only for our wings —
Our little hearts are faithful.*

After Amestris had read this poem out loud, Artabase said, smiling, "I am sure that the philosopher does not realise that his butterflies have been used for such a gallant purpose and it is likely that the young Simonides is secretly complicit with one of the Princes."

"But," replied Amestris, "this gallantry does not have to be a secret since the Queen herself approved of me asking Democritus for a treatise on butterflies. As for the poems," she added looking at Palmis and Artabase, "would you both do me the pleasure of not talking about them?"

"That silence," replied Palmis, with a smile, "will also be a favour for Prince Ariamene."

"I assure you," said Amestris, "that a favour known to you and wise Artabase will do me no harm in the mind of the Prince."

"I agree," said Artabase, "but it will be difficult to keep this a secret: it would be better not to try to."

"It is true," replied Amestris, laughing, "that it is only butterflies speaking here and, to follow your advice," she added addressing Artabase, "I will show all this to the Queen as soon as she has a free quarter of an hour. If the whim so takes me, I will reply to this second poem from the butterflies."

After this, Artabase, who had read the beginning of the remarks on butterflies, said, "I confess that I would not honestly have thought butterflies worthy of such an intriguing piece of research; but to speak plainly, Democritus showed them to me, and I found more plausibility in these thoughts than in his atoms. To believe me, you need to each read this treatise for yourselves: it is too long to read aloud now for I know that the Queens is expecting you."

"I will be sure, therefore," said Amestris, "not to regret my curiosity."

"I can believe that," said Palmis, "for that curiosity has led to an interesting treatise and gallant verse."

"All this," said Amestris, "emboldens me to show the poems and the remarks to the Queen when we have read them."

But Amestris did not find a chance to do so that day, and the temptation to reply to the butterflies was so strong that she did that instead. She gave her response to Cerinte, who was free to share it, but she did not want her to send it to Ariamene. Cerinte, aware of Amestris' feelings, showed the response first to Artabase and then to Palmis and gave them copies, even though they hadn't expressly asked for them. Palmis took it and read it out loud:

Reply from Amestris to the Butterflies

*Butterflies with golden wings
So beautifully patterned,
You who seem always to be in flight
And know so well how to speak,
If your love was faithful
There would be nothing more beautiful.
Always adorned, always gallant,*

*Always playful and exquisite,
Without ambition, without desire,
Without chagrin, without jealousy,
Chatting with the zephyrs
And living only on pleasures
In this ever-blooming Empire.
But, alas, do I dare say it?
This is not to offend you:
But butterflies are synonymous with lightness;
I see through your aimable pretence:
You are only constant in a painting.*

"This poem," said Palmis, "so cleverly wants to be contradicted; I am sure that Artabase, being so gallant himself, will agree."

"I am too obliging," he replied, "to disagree with you. These poems," he added, "are entertaining rather than persuasive."

"It is true," replied Palmis, "but things that are entertaining are often also successful at persuading."

Artabase, on meeting Ariamene, showed him the poem that Cerinte had given him: Ariamene liked it but was nevertheless perturbed that Amestris had not sent it to him herself and that she had preferred to reply to the second poem rather than the first one. While the Queen was out walking that evening, Amestris took the chance to show her the remarks and the poems about butterflies; although she concealed her reply and the little box which she thought too precious to share. But since Palmis had already spoken of it to the other ladies, the Queen knew about it and was not happy that Amestris had not shown it to her. Although the Queen loved her dearly, she was annoyed to know that Ariamene was in love with Amestris because the very ambition which made Ariamene esteem Amestris, in the service of his love, also made the Queen fear Amestris. The Queen wanted Amestris near her, but she did not want to see Amestris possess the same, or even a higher, rank than she did: this would be the case if Ariamene, who was not her son, were to marry Amestris and Darius were to die. She hid this thought and instead showed her respect for the remarks on butterflies and found the poems sweet, but she also wanted to see the bejewelled box. This love token made quite a stir at the court and Democritus, who had given the remarks on butterflies to the Prince, found it very amusing when

he learnt that they had been placed in a precious little box covered in jewels. He remarked that Nature had obviously not been obeyed since her most carefully hidden stones had been dug out of the ground and used on such trifles. He then added, laughing, "If, that is, the science of my atoms would allow me to afford Nature intention and thus contradict myself."

However, as in all courts in the world, Kings who are skillful are aware of everything that is happening, and everything that is said which pertains to them or the state. Darius knew about all the gallantries of both his Queen and his courtiers: he did not in public find any fault with the love between Amestris and Ariamene, but for hidden reasons, his own different to the Queen's, and which did not come to light until some time later, he strongly disapproved of it. Therefore, since his mind was mostly preoccupied with great plans and he was plotting a new war in Greece, he decided to send the two Princes away from the court for he did not approve of Xerxes' affections for Palmis either, even though she was a person of great merit. Indeed, he had other plans for this Prince than even the Queen could surmise. And although he held the rare learning of Democritus in great esteem, he feared that his new doctrine might become dangerous, for nothing is more pernicious in a court than people who do not expect any recompense for their virtue and who fear no punishment for their errors. Darius was also convinced that libertinage created bad Kings and bad subjects: and since the atoms of Democritus unwittingly led young people towards libertinage, he got Artabase to persuade him to go to Egypt, ordering the most learned Magi of his state to prevent this new doctrine from spreading and to persuade people that he who was teaching it did not believe it himself, but was only trying to come up with something original. But, as for the Princes, after soliciting the advice of his brother, the prudent Artaphernes, Darius changed his mind about sending both away together and only sent away Ariamene. He did so in such a way that far from seeming like an exile, Ariamene instead got all the compliments of the court for Darius gave him governance over the most considerable of his vast states.

pp. 202–37. After lengthy goodbyes, Ariamene leaves. Xerxes is full of praise for his brother. Darius wants to engage in another war with Greece, but falls ill. He makes his brother the executor of his will and dies. There is an elaborate funeral, but Ariamene does not know what has happened and so does not

attend the funeral as he is still in exile. Artaphernes reads out the will in which Darius states that Xerxes should succeed him and continue Cyrus's line, but he wants to let Ariamene give an account of himself: Artaphernes should decide who reigns. Whoever reigns will marry Amestris (these are the 'other plans' mentioned in the passage above). Xerxes is very surprised at this news, having always thought his brother would succeed; Amestris is proven ambitious and fickle, ready to shift her affections. To avoid a power vacuum, Xerxes is obliged to accept the crown, but he summons his brother, explaining the situation. Demarates wants Ariamene to dispute the crown, sending Simonides to convey this. Ariamene is most upset at the prospect of losing Amestris, upset too that she hasn't written to him. He seems willing to give up the crown but writes to her telling her she should make the final decision: it is in this state of uncertainty that Democritus comes across him.

Ariamene respected Darius's memory and honoured the Queen, who had paid such attention to his education. He loved the Prince, his brother, with extreme tenderness; and he was hopelessly in love with someone he suspected could be happy without him as long as she could reign. He was so preoccupied by his grief that he hardly recognised Democritus when he encountered him one evening at the place where he was staying. Democritus, who knew of the situation from gossip and from Xerxes' messenger whom he had met, took the liberty of presenting himself to the Prince.

"Ah Democritus," cried Prince Ariamene, once he had recognised him, "today I wish I possessed that indifference you show towards everything that is great in the world. The state I find myself in has started to convince me that it is sweeter to disdain greatness than to possess it and that a wise philosopher is much happier than a prince who cannot control his passions."

"What you say, Sire," replied Democritus with a modest and smiling air, "seems more worthy of a philosopher than a prince."

"Yes," said Ariamene, taking Democritus to one side. "But at the same time as I reason thus, my heart is torn by two violent passions which I would like you to heal."

"Since all the actions of great Princes are known to everyone," said Democritus, "I can guess that it is the crown, which is contested, and the beautiful Amestris, who may be taken from you with the crown, that are the causes of the trouble in your soul. If I did not fear displeasing you, I

would advance boldly that you would be happier if your reason could renounce all ambition and love. The crown weighs heavily on those who wear it and the pleasures of love are so frivolous and short-lived that it is better to cure them with reason than with time, which only destroys that reason."

"Since you have only loved learning," replied Ariamene, sighing, "and you have only desired ruling over yourself, I am not surprised that you speak as a philosopher. I confess that you would do me a great pleasure if you could give me any means of preventing the ills that inflict me."

"In truth, Sire," replied Democritus, "I only know of one universal remedy for all misfortunes that might occur and that is to expect them, to resign oneself to them and to suffer them as tranquilly as one can. If all great people in the world saw themselves as nature has made them — that is purely and simply as men — they would not find it so distressing when fate strips them of everything around them that does not pertain to their being. And as for love," he continued, "since almost all the pleasures are imaginary, time will most likely heal it if reason cannot. I assure you, Sire, that the longer you live, the more you will know that greatness without philosophy is more of an ill than a good. Go then, Sire, and without anger, fight for the crown that is being taken from you, if you cannot concede it as a philosopher. And if you win, wear it for the happiness of your subjects rather than for your own; but if you lose, understand this as a great weight lifted from you. I assure you, Sire, that if you lose the crown, the one who wins it will one day be more unhappy than you. Without being prophets, true philosophers say that supreme greatness and happiness do not go together for long, as I have said to you a thousand times in the many conversations I have had the honour of conducting with you."

"I will do what I can to follow your advice," replied Ariamene, "whether I rule or not; but as for love," he continued, sighing, "you know so little about it that it would be better not to say anymore."

Democritus remained silent out of respect; the Prince, needing to rest, went to sleep and left early the next morning.

pp. 242–90. Ariamene resolves to return to Susa and stops in a palace on the way; Xerxes is there. The two brothers vow not to let the matter of succession divide them and lament their equally sad prospects in love (Xerxes loves Palmis,

Ariamene loves Amestris and whoever is King must marry the latter). They return to Susa as close as ever; everyone wants to know the outcome. Amestris disappoints Ariamene, showing her love of ambition and she refuses to make the decision for him. Palmis is unhappy. The brothers both make speeches to Artaphernes: Ariamene shows he is willing to cede, praising his brother as worthy successor, but nevertheless claims his right to succession as the oldest son; Xerxes says Ariamene should succeed if the decision were based on merit alone but that Darius's choice should be followed; and promises that Ariamene will be his first minister if he reigns. Xerxes is chosen; Ariamene supports him; the latter, heartbroken, dies in a sea battle against the Greeks and all mourn; Palmis dies of grief. Everyone is impressed by their bond and their equanimity.

Theramène finished reading.

*

"I must say," said Cleomire, "that it would have been a shame if Darius's horse had not won him the crown, for this story which follows on from his reign seemed very pleasant to me and these two illustrious brothers were certainly very respectable people."¹⁷

"This is why," said Clearque, "we should not be surprised that Plutarch, as we have already said, made an example of the perfect friendship between the two Princes, both brothers and friends; and that Herodotus before him and Justin since have spoken so favourably of the way they handled the dispute."

"For me," said Hermilie, "the pleasure was in meeting Democritus: for I had thought that he was an impertinent philosopher who mocked everything in a vulgar way, but instead I found him wise and polite."

"And as for me," said Cleomire, "since this conversation started with a discussion of impertinent people, I will not stop myself from saying that Palmis, represented amiably, was nevertheless a little impertinent to not have resolved, at least, to pretend to please a Prince who adored her and to have so much loved another who only felt esteem and friendship for her. Amestris was surely more impressive: for without having a heart encumbered by a great passion, she kept Ariamene's love alive and also

17 The story, according to Herodotus, is that Darius's horse earned him the crown by being the first to neigh at sunrise thus fulfilling the requirements for selection.

knew how to reign over Xerxes' mind, if not his heart."

"These two different characters," said Theramène, "show us that one cannot love at will or stop loving on command and that inclination and aversion are often stronger than reason."

"Palmis' tenderness," said Hermilie, "did not make her think, say, or do anything against virtue, or against what is appropriate; and for this reason, I excuse and pity her. I liked her better than Amestris who seemed to be consumed by ambition."

"You can say what you like," replied Cleomire, "but Palmis was impertinent to die of grief for a Prince who did not repay her passion."

"But," replied Hermilie, "Ariamene was one of her good friends and he was not wrong in choosing not to be her lover: he did not even know about the passion she felt for him. In short, I think that one can and should be afflicted by the death of a friend of extraordinary merit. In fact, I see Palmis as unfortunate and not impertinent and I think that Democritus, as accustomed as he is to laugh at all life's events, would pity her if he knew of her unfortunate death. But to speak sincerely, Darius and Ariamene are the heroes of this little story."

"Who would have thought," interrupted Cleone, "that the conversation about impertinences would have been followed by such a pleasant tale. However," she added, "I am not completely satisfied for I had a great desire to see the remarks by Democritus on butterflies."

"You can see them tomorrow if you so wish," replied Theramène, "for the Greek manuscript which furnished the story I've just read has also yielded the work on butterflies, included in a separate bundle of papers, and which the same translator has rendered into French."

"We accept your offer," said Hermilie, "I will wait for you tomorrow in my study."

"So that we don't end the day with an impertinence," replied Cleomire, "let us depart, as the day is ending, and we will praise everything we have heard on our return."

And so, this pleasant company retired once they had thanked Theramène for having shared with them this delightful tale.

‘On Butterflies’

Theramène was very precise in all matters, so he arrived early the next day at Hermilie’s home, followed by Cleone, Clarice and Clearque.

“I beg you,” Cleomire said to Hermilie, “tell people that you are not in: I know that you have female friends only interested in light-hearted entertainment,¹ who mock those who like to read and who would find our curiosity and our desire to read these remarks about butterflies very impertinent.”

“I have already made sure of this,” replied Hermilie, “because I had the same thought as you”.

“That is very prudent,” interjected Cleone. “But after all, I do not think we are more at fault than all those ladies who learn new philosophies and make judgements without understanding.”

“You are right,” replied Cleomire, “and what you say gives me the courage, at the risk of seeming impertinent and maybe even extremely ignorant to Theramène, to entreat him to permit me to ask him, before he starts reading these remarks, whether he understands why Artabase, in the story of Ariamene, when talking Democritus, did not refer to the secret properties of the lodestone and quinine to prove to him that there are things which we consider to be true but which one cannot know perfectly.”

“It is,” replied Theramène, “because Artabase did not know of these two substances, or, at least, he did not know of quinine, since we owe our knowledge of that wonderful medicine to the famous explorers of this century who brought it back from the Indies.² But knowledge of

1 ‘Light-hearted entertainment’ for ‘le jeu’. See the definition in the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*: ‘Recreation, passetemps, action gaye et folastre, par laquelle on se divertit, on se resjouit’ [Recreation, pass-time, gay and playful action, with which one amuses and enjoys oneself].

2 Quinine was discovered to the West in 1631 in Peru. See the Introduction.

lodestones is ancient: Pliny explains that its marvellous virtues were discovered by a shepherd watching his flock on mount Ida. But, as I said, knowledge of quinine is new in Europe. You even have a female friend who wrote a poem to celebrate the King's recovery from illness thanks to its awe-inspiring properties: this poem gives us an unforgettable account of the power of both lodestones and quinine."

"Since I was not in Paris at that time," replied Cleomire, "it will be a great pleasure to hear this poem, and I think that present company will permit this."

Theramène knew from the ladies' silence that they did not disagree with Cleomire's proposal, and proceeded to recite the poem:

*Concede, superb lodestone, concede to quinine,
We know that the heavens have given you
Secret virtues which we cannot understand;
Even iron for you seems to have a tender heart.
Your invincible spirit which passes into other bodies
And which makes them move without life or springs
Is a sort of miracle
Against which nothing proves too great an obstacle.
You rule the compass and through the whole world³
You are guide of the seas,
But by a supreme power
Quinine disarms and weakens death itself.
With a divine force, it stops the course
Of those feverish attacks, which wield terror over the most pleasant
days.
It wards off the shivers which make souls tremble,
And overcomes both ice and flame,
Boast, boast, lodestone, of your untold effects,
But quinine has achieved more than you: it has cured Louis.*

"I do not regret my curiosity," said Cleomire, "now that I've heard the poem read by Theramène. If Artabase had known as much about the beneficial properties of the lodestone and quinine as she who wrote this poem, he would certainly have been able to make significant arguments

3 'Whole world': another instance where 'univers' in French seemed better as 'world'.

against those who because they cannot know perfectly either their creator or what occurs in themselves doubt everything except what their senses show them."

"I remember," said Clearque, "having in the past seen the incredible experiments with lodestones conducted by a physician, whose name is well known to all.⁴ It was very delightful and fascinating to witness them, and his explanations were very pleasant to hear: but even so, I am not convinced that the cause of this magic force, which seems to give life to the iron it both attracts and repels, is as known as the effects. As for quinine, the primary virtue of which is to stop and heal fever, I have not yet heard it defined sufficiently to think that it is perfectly understood: we ought to admire both these things without presuming to know them well."

"I am now no longer worried," interrupted Cléomire, "by the fact that it was my ignorance that prompted Theramène read out my friend's poem; and my idea that Artabase might have been able refer to these two substances when speaking to Democritus was not entirely unreasonable. Now," she continued, "let us listen to the remarks about butterflies, although," she added, "I would like to add further comment to Theramène about the story he told us yesterday when this is finished."

Everyone consented to Cleomire's request and Theramène began to read the following:

'Observations on Butterflies'⁵

Normally we admire what foreign climes have to offer because of our tendency to disregard what is common in our lands; however, even the most beautiful insects of the Indies are no match, in my opinion, for the butterflies of Greece or Susa. Nothing is so pleasant: they are, so to speak, the flowers of the air, as admirable as those which grow in the ground. And even though there is nothing so ordinary as these beautiful insects of our own land and there are so many species, it is impossible to say with certainty how they are generated: this is a secret which nature still keeps from us.

4 This is likely Jacques Rohault (1618–72) who was known to carry out magnet experiments. See also 'On Uncertainty', n. 17 above.

5 Marginal note: 'M. de Betoul' which again refers to Élie de Bétoulaud.

Some say that butterflies are caterpillars in disguise and that, having spun their cocoon, they pierce it and fly off, with patterned wings that match the patterns they had as caterpillars. Others say that butterflies come from the dew that falls in spring and freezes to the size of a grain of millet on the leaves of certain grasses, before turning into a little worm and then, they claim, a butterfly.⁶

But neither of these opinions seems to me to be convincing. As regards the first: although caterpillars change into butterflies to escape their cocoons, they only become, as it were, bastard butterflies, feeble, small, barely able to fly, living only for a few days in this shape; whereas the butterflies we are talking about fly with great lightness, have beautiful painted wings in bright colours and appear from the beginning of spring, before caterpillars have even formed their cocoons, which proves that such beautiful children cannot have such ugly mothers.

The second opinion is no more likely. If butterflies were made, as claimed, from the thick dew of particular grasses, it would be possible to see, little by little, both the worm that develops from the dew, and the butterfly that develops from the worm: no-one has yet observed this.

I would instead be more tempted to think that these butterflies are produced by other butterflies, just as bees are made from other bees. I would therefore be more persuaded that these little insects lay eggs in discreet locations where, let us say, the warmth of the sun helps new little butterflies to hatch.

But although their generation can only be spoken about uncertainly, their shape can be discussed with more precision.

They have two little horns on their heads, expanding at the tips so that they seem like mini versions of the maces that university beadles carry; the little horns, usually threaded like rosary beads, often have little white marks on their tips.

Their eyes are like the eyes of flies that we can see through a microscope; and even though they are very small, they are able to distinguish from far away all sorts of objects.

The most remarkable feature of most of these little animals is a little tongue or trunk about the width of a strand of hair and nearly an inch in

6 The first suggestion is from Aristotle; the second is from Pliny the Elder. For further discussion of butterfly generation, see the Introduction.

length.⁷ They can curl this tongue from the tip as if it were a little snake, and they can retract or extend it at will. It is likely that this little tongue curls up in this way to more easily attend to the soft and downy parts of flowers and other things the butterflies eat.

Another remarkable feature is that on both sides of this little tongue or trunk are two raised defences on their muzzle, covered in little hairs, through which their tongue passes: this was nature's design, so that with these little machines they can peel any food they catch on their tongue.

They have four little feet which resemble those of grasshoppers, and at the end of these feet they have little claws so that they can grip where they land.

Their backs, which are at an angle, like the front of a breastplate, are covered with a strong, polished, glossy skin, with an enamel-like consistency. This can be observed most easily in larger butterflies.

But it is the wings of this little animal that deserve the most admiration. Each one has four, which fit so well together that it seems, when butterflies are flying, as if they only have two. The structure of these wings is marvellous: they are composed of a sort of cartilage, which, without the delicate down that colours the wings of these little animals, seems thin and transparent like loose parchment or like dried, translucent pig bladder. This cartilage is full of little vein-like branches, intended to carry nourishing sap to those parts. Where they meet the body, these little wings are covered by quite long little hairs which are shaped like little feathers.

But their shape is not always the same; some wings are like waves, others are more like pikes, and others still, especially the biggest ones, are jagged and come to two points which form, on the back, a sort of crescent.

The way butterflies arrange their wings when they are still is fascinating: sometimes they stretch them to spread out their beauty. Sometimes, they adjust them into a shape that resembles a triangle; and sometimes they join them at the top, one against the other: the latter

7 'Nearly an inch': the French reads 'neuf ou dix lignes' [nine or ten 'lines']: according to the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*: 'On appelle aussi, Ligne, Une certaine mesure qui est la douzième partie d'un poulce [a particular measurement that is the twelfth of an inch]. Cotgrave gives: 'or the twelfth part of an inch in measuring.'

movement is mostly a sign of fear. This is also what they do when it rains: nature having taught them that making their wings a kind of house means the rain runs off them more easily and is less of a discomfort.

But it is particularly the beauty and variety of these little wings that merit our admiration. Some are white with little greyish and irregular veins, shaped like mosaics; others are pearl grey with brown stripes; others are flesh coloured, flecked with black. Some butterflies have the two top wings speckled with yellow and black and the bottom two the colour of fire with three little black dots on the tips of each; other wings are dappled with yellow or the colour of musk and russet; others are varied in colour like French marigolds; others have either purple or blue on top and white on the bottom. Some are lemon-coloured with black zeroes, others are marbled with light grey and pink; others are almost all black with flame-coloured or bright orange borders, adorned with little white dots. Some wings are the yellow colour of broom flower, with black tips; others are marked with a sort of blue and flesh-coloured circle in the middle that looks like an eye, or, to put it better, like the tip of a peacock feather; there are others which are marked with waves of light sand-yellow and black; others which are black with different white circles, and look like mourning garb. Some wings are dappled with blue and black; on some butterflies the two top wings are iron-grey with a cherry-coloured border and the bottom two are cherry-coloured with two or three iron-grey dots. Some are a yellowish green with an orange dot in the middle of each wing; some butterflies have top wings that are lemon-yellow and bottom ones that are golden with a brown border towards the tips of the wings; others have wings that are willow green against a white background. But the most beautiful, and thus, the most precious, of all butterflies are those which are pearlized, with doe-coloured wings, adorned with mother-of-pearl circles which, with their shimmering glint look so like real pearls so that you would be forgiven for thinking that these animals are covered in them. This feature is also unique to these butterflies: it is possible that there are no other insects in the world which possess such beauty. Other butterflies have wings that are all grey, all white or all hazel, or very small: that is, they are common and ordinary and not worthy of much consideration. There are, in short, countless species, both rare and common: a full description of these species has been written elsewhere and would be too long here.

The colours of the rarer species are admirable because of their subtlety, splendour, charming variety and the extravagance of their patterns; it seems as if nature takes a playful pleasure from butterfly wings, just as she does from petals. However, there is nothing more difficult than explaining clearly how all these colours form on the wings of these beautiful insects.

I do not know whether to advance the theory that the different colours come from the different flowers the butterflies eat. What persuades me that this opinion could be plausible is that one can readily see — indeed I have observed this many times myself — that near to heather and broom can be found significant numbers of butterflies with wings of the same yellow colour as the flowers of those plants. Likewise, white butterflies can be seen to gather where there is a noticeable number of the white flowers of the plant called a *volubilis* or wreath; and many butterflies with violet or blue wings can be found in places where wild chicory, scabious, or flowering mallows grow. Equally, many butterflies with wings the colour of russet or musk or yellow can be found in gardens with lots of marigold, amaranth or heliotropes. I have often seen butterflies with flame-coloured lower wings constantly flying and hovering around pomegranate flowers. The way these little butterflies feed on the nectar of those flowers means they could well take on their colours, just as caterpillars and even spiders often take on the colour of the plants or flowers that they feed on; it is not difficult to believe, then, that what happens to those insects also happens to butterflies. Another fact which supports the idea that the colour of butterfly wings is determined by the food they get from flowers — it must also be noted that wings have similar consistency and fragility to petals — is that one hardly ever sees butterflies with green wings, just as petals are rarely green. To the extent that butterflies are always adorned with the same colours as flowers and only rarely display different ones, it is possible that the correlation between butterflies and flowers only comes from the food butterflies take from flowers.

Pearl-bordered butterflies support this theory because since it is likely that these butterflies only seem covered with pearls because they only feed on dew, it is also possible that other butterflies only bear the colour of certain flowers because they also feed on them. And perhaps we could argue with as much plausibility that a significant number of

animals derive something from what they see, particularly when they are in heat. Hares and partridges are white in snow-covered mountains; and I have heard some Jewish people say, when I was among them, that Laban's sheep changed colour according to the objects Jacob put in front of them when they went to the watering place.⁸ But even if these conjectures are not true and it is simply the case that butterflies of a certain species engender others of a similar species, it is certainly the case that these little creatures have a preference for flowers which look like them, preferring these flowers to all others.

And yet, they are less inclined to seek out these flowers than they are other similar butterflies; and a butterfly will always prefer to follow one of the same species, readily leaving a different one. These little animals make those distinctions admirably and take more pleasure in being with those which resemble them than they do with those which do not; so true is it that nature has imprinted on all beings an inclination towards those who are similar.

Their way of flying is especially entertaining, if one pays attention to it, particularly if the butterflies are on a forest path protected from the sun's harsh rays. Sometimes they spend hours whirling around pleasantly together, like rapid whirlwinds; other times, chiefly if they are of the same species, they glide close together at a perpendicular angle, swooping and diving for a while in this configuration, roughly the height of a pike, in the delightful play of these little animals.

Like all other insects, butterflies like the sun, light, and heat and this is why they appear more frequently in the summer than any other season.

There are also domestic butterflies which flutter around lit candles. But it seems to me that these ones, which we might call dwarf butterflies because they are never very big, are not of the same species as those we see flying in the fields, since they do not possess the variety of bright, distinctive colours, perhaps because they do not feed on flowers in the same way as the ones which live in gardens and the countryside.

As regards the question of how long butterflies live: it is difficult to

8 Genesis 30: 25–40 tells of Jacob, who had served Laban for 14 years as his shepherd, and agreed to continue working if Laban pay him in sheep and goats that are striped or spotted: Jacob peeled sticks so they looked striped and then got the animals to mate in front of them to produce striped offspring.

give a precise answer. However, we can hardly doubt that they live for over a year because in the first days of spring they can be seen in as much splendour and beauty as they had the year before: this would not be the case if they had only just been born.

*

"I must admit," said Cleomire, after Theramène had finished reading, "that these Observations are very intriguing: if the treatises on colours and smells that people say Democritus wrote were as pleasant as this then it is even more of a shame that they are lost. This work seems so plausible that it merits the Italian phrase: '*se non è vero è ben trovato*'.⁹"

"In my opinion," Hermilie interrupted, "I suspect that these Observations are actually by a modern Democritus, a friend of the translator of the alleged Greek manuscript,¹⁰ and they are appropriately placed since it is just as likely that Democritus wrote a treatise on butterflies as on smells and colours."

"I had the same thought as you," replied Theramène, "and one must therefore praise the author of these Observations since the real Democritus could not have done better himself, even as such a great philosopher as he was."

"Since," added Cleomire, "butterflies are the most beautiful children of the sun, which affords them such beautiful and varied colours, I would like to ask permission to make this comment to Theramène: in the story he read us yesterday, it seemed as if Democritus did not dare speak against the religion of the Persians who worshipped the sun."

"What you have noted," said Theramène, "is an effect of the philosopher's politeness and not his ignorance, as this story makes very clear in several places: for this philosopher was as polite as he was learned and did not want to be disrespectful to those who honoured him so greatly. It is certain that he was greatly admired by Xerxes because Democritus's father hosted almost every member of Xerxes' impressive army before the battle of Salamis: all historians note this, even though it seems unbelievable. So, Democritus, finding himself in a court where he was received with great honour, would have shown a lack of judgement

9 'Even if it is not true, it is a good fabrication.'

10 There is a marginal note: 'M. de Betoul'.

if he had disputed their beliefs. The ambassadors of Siam and Alger," continued Theramène, "behaved similarly in the courts that they went to; and the ambassadors of the Christian Princes avoided talking about religion with the Grand Lord and the Kings of Persia. Politics and the trade between nations were the only subjects discussed, and our famous voyagers did not dare to insult the Great Mughal regarding his religion. In short, a reasonable traveller must be ready to suffer martyrdom for his own religion, but he cannot speak rashly about the religion of the Kings he visits, unless forced to do so." Theramène added, "Though I must admit that of all idolatry, that of the Persians has always seemed to me the most excusable: nothing in the universe is as beautiful or as admirable as the sun, commonly known as the soul of the world. One of the most excellent poets¹¹ of this century was right to say:

*Were I ever to have made the mistake of making my gods visible
I would have worshipped the sun*

"These two lines of verse are very beautiful," said Clearque, "but there is a sonnet by the same author, of which I know only four lines, which is just as beautiful:

*Shadow of the creator and light of the world
Announcing your glory to so many different stars
Sun, which everyday looks over the universe
Stop, from now on, your vagabond course.*

"These lines are certainly very beautiful," replied Cleomire. "But I know two stanzas of a very beautiful ode by an illustrious young friend of the author of the poem you've have just recited. This is another beautiful poem about the sun, which also proves my suggestion that butterflies are its most exquisite children.¹²

*Thus one sees, in its round course,
The star, which turns incessantly
Without abandoning for a moment
The glorious task of lighting up the world,*

11 Marginal note: 'M. de Gombault'.

12 Marginal note: 'M. P...'.

*As it takes on thousands of different cares
In thousands of places across the universe.*

*There, under submerged vaults
Its rays give life to treasures;
Here, by the smallest efforts,
They crown the fields with the year's treasures
Where butterflies and flowers
Paint a thousand colours.*

"These lines of verse are beautiful and very pleasant," said Theramène, "and they suit your thinking well. They also give," he added, "a very noble impression of the sun which the Persians saw as a universal agent in the universe and as the only object which could represent the god they worshipped. And I do not think I am mistaken in saying that of all the things God has created, apart from man whose immortal soul places him above all of God's visible creations, nothing gives us such a good idea of his divinity as the sight and the marvellous effects of this beautiful star which alone lights up all others. The sun is necessary for all parts of the earth, for everything that breathes, whether directly or indirectly, all the way to the universe's centre. It is the sun which generates not only the diversity of climates but also this abundant variety of things which are earth's main beauty, and which serve to connect all nations by ties of commerce. If every country had the same trees, plants, animals, mines, and everything else, everyone would remain where they were born: the mutual emulation of nations, which produces individual curiosity and exchange between peoples, would not exist. One could even say that the sciences and the arts would not be in their current advanced state. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the Persians, who were not God's chosen people (who alone know the truth), saw the sun as an image of the god of gods, which made them feel his benevolent force: without it, there is no life, no joy, no order, and no time in the whole universe."

"What you say," replied Hermilie, "is admirably beautiful. It seems to me that the fact that we cannot gaze too long at this beautiful star, as we might another object, including the other stars, is a lesson for all men against penetrating too closely into the secrets of he who created the world. This lesson offers limitations to all philosophers past and future,

who have believed and who now believe that they know as certainly how he created it as a simple potter turning his wheel knows how his vase is created in his hands."

"It is true," said Cleomire, "that this is a great audacity. But, for fear of saying something impertinent, I will tell you all this: I recently encountered at the home of a lady of my acquaintance, a man who taught her philosophy. I wanted to get rid of him because he was irritating, and the word 'system' which he repeated often and which I did not understand very well, was making me uncomfortable. I spoke to him playfully, not being able to speak to him in any other way. I said to him that to show how far the knowledge of even the most learned of philosophers was limited, I was certain that he, although I wanted to think him capable, would not be able to explain why the sun blackened the skin of the Moors (and the blood in their veins) and left the whites of their eyes and their teeth whiter than those of men of any nation. This strange question made the lady who was hosting us laugh and although the philosopher wanted to treat this question as frivolous and impertinent, he could only reply with a nonsensical answer that did not prove anything except that the art of conjecture is better in politics than in philosophy, and that it is a folly to affirm what can never be known with certainty."

The whole group laughed at Cleomire's question and the awkward position she had put the philosopher in and agreed that the Observations on Butterflies were more plausible and natural than what Democritus said about atoms; and that nothing was more certain than worshipping the God of all and fulfilling his law without wanting to define in detail or describe with certainty the way in which it pleased him to have created the universe. After this, everyone thanked Cleomire for having prompted the conversation about impertinence, which allowed for so many pleasant, sound and moral things to be discussed.

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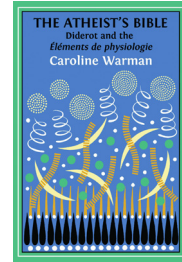
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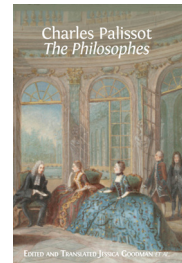
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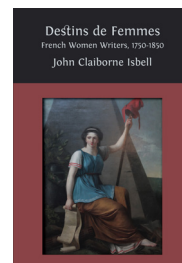


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